



CRITICAL THEORIES  
AND POETIC PRACTICE IN  
THE "LYRICAL BALLADS"

BY

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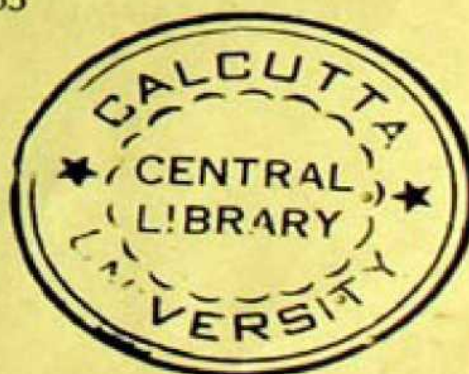
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**Critical Theories and Poetic Practice  
in the “Lyrical Ballads”**



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## P R E F A C E

THE following pages were written as the principal thesis submitted for the Doctorate degree of the University of Calcutta. The favourable reports on them received from such eminent scholars as Professors Herford and Elton have encouraged the writer to publish them in the form of a book. The controversy regarding the real intention of Wordsworth in affirming identity between the language of prose and poetry can hardly be regarded as a closed one. Coleridge's assumption that by language Wordsworth meant both *words* and *order* has met with an increasing measure of dissent from modern critics, who have no doubt been struck with the practical untenability of the resulting position. I have tried to review the whole situation in a closer and more exhaustive manner than has perhaps yet been done, and attempted to get at Wordsworth's real meaning by a strict interpretation of the words used in the Preface. The drawing of the conclusion has been anything but an easy task ; for Wordsworth's own position tends to vary in different parts of the Preface, and the reconciliation of these conflicting statements is a particularly baffling problem. For one thing, it has involved the writer in a series of repetitions which he has hardly been able to avoid, and for which the peculiarly tangled and intricate nature of the subject-matter is mainly responsible. The conclusions arrived at cannot be claimed as original ; for they can be but two, and both of them have been anticipated from the very inception of the controversy. A certain amount of originality may, however, be claimed in respect of the balancing and weighing of the arguments for and against the two positions and the exact reason for the preference for one of them.

I have also tried to illustrate Wordsworth's theories by an extensive reference to his practice in the *Lyrical Ballads*. The various poems included in them have been



examined from two points of view : (1) whether the language in them corresponds in any material degree to rustic speech ; and (2) whether Wordsworth contents himself with adopting the words of prose in these poems, but also tries to conform to prose order. An attempt has also been made to account for the varying degrees of success in the application of the theory in the different poems. The result of all these, it is hoped, may have been to elucidate Wordsworth's real intention and the scope of his theories about language to a slightly greater extent than before.

The conclusion arrived at from this elaborate survey has been of a rather inconclusive kind. Wordsworth must have primarily intended to use the *words* of prose in his poems, though he was further sensible of the fact that the prose order may also be transported along with the simple words into the sphere of poetry. If it is not anything more definite and pointed than this, it is because of the confusion and entanglement in Wordsworth's own mind between *words* and *order*—a confusion which vitiates his arguments in the Prefaces and detracts from the value of his subtle and original comments on poetic art and creation. His practice also is marked by a similar confusion and inconsistency ; sometimes he gives us the words of prose without the order, and at other times he aims at combining the two. In his worst poems the puerility of the words is intensified by a reluctance to work up the feelings of the reader ; in his best the simple words arrange themselves naturally into the order of prose, resulting in a heightened austerity and depth of impression. The final upshot of all this is that Wordsworth succeeds in demonstrating, not that identity under all circumstances between the language of poetry and prose which he fondly expected to do, but only an experimental truth that the simple words in everyday use, generally arranged according to prose order, are sometimes capable of attaining to the highest effects in poetry. This is a valuable



truth, if not for the theorist, at any rate for the active practitioner of the poetic craft.

A close and critical study of the Prefaces also reveals Wordsworth's fundamental weakness as a dialectician and the peculiar *naïveté* of his critical outlook which makes him lose sight in theory, if not in practice, of the complexity of poetic style and resolve it merely into a question of the comparative length and familiarity of the words employed. The style of poetry is a much more complex and composite thing than Wordsworth would have us believe, but he has made all his successors recognize in practice the preponderating importance of the simple homely words in it. That is a great thing to have done though it may not satisfy a philosophical theorist and a stickler for precise enunciations. Above everything else, Wordsworth's best poems reveal a perfect synthesis between the spirit of prose and poetry, an alliance going down much deeper than mere community of language.

These are some of the questions treated in the following pages. I am keenly aware of the many defects, in respect of both treatment and expression by which they are marked, and would crave the indulgence of the reader for these lapses, which are perhaps inevitable in an Indian student's handling of a foreign language.

My sincere and grateful thanks are due to Professor S. Radhakrishnan, M.A., D.Litt., King George V Professor of Philosophy and President of the Post-Graduate Council in Arts, Calcutta University, for the very kind interest he has taken in the book and the invaluable help he has extended to it in the matter of its publication. I am also deeply indebted to my former pupil and present colleague, Mr. Subodh Chandra Sen Gupta, M.A., who has evinced the keenest interest in the progress of the work from its very beginning, and has offered me unstinted help in all respects, and to whom the happy termination of the present venture will possibly give more satisfaction than to the author himself.





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*April 17, 1930*





PART I  
CRITICAL THEORIES



## 1 Introduction

WORDSWORTH'S Prefaces to the *Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge's criticisms thereon in the *Biographia Literaria* have justly been considered as the starting-points of modern criticism ; they have raised discussions the echoes of which are lingering yet. Certain of the more important issues between Wordsworth and Coleridge have been still awaiting decision. Later critics who have taken up the subject, *e.g.* Sampson and Shawcross,<sup>1</sup> seem to have entered the field rather as avowed champions of the cause of Wordsworth than as critics holding an impartial balance ; and the trend of their arguments seems to lead to a rather unfair depreciation of the critical abilities of Coleridge. The great achievements of Wordsworth in the field of poetry appear to have imposed upon their critical judgment to such an extent as to have driven them to find excuses and apologies for even some of his most untenable positions ; while accusing Coleridge of illiberality of interpretation, they have shut their eyes to the many and glaring inconsistencies of Wordsworth in the enunciation of his theory. Wordsworth was, no doubt, alive to the defects of contemporary poetry with a keenness of which poets alone are capable ; and with a rare courage and originality he cut his way through the mass of impediments heaped together by his fellow-craftsmen down to the primal bed-rock of directness and simplicity in both thought and language. But while his views and perceptions are quite sound at bottom, and while, in not a few cases, his actual practice serves as a splendid illustration of the truth of his theories, it must be admitted that in the precise statement and enunciation of these latter he stumbles and falters.

<sup>1</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, Chs. I-IV, XIV-XXII, and *Wordsworth's Prefaces and Essays on Poetry* (1800-1815), edited by George Sampson (Cambridge University Press, 1923). *Biographia Literaria*, edited with his *Aesthetical Essays*, J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1907).



Wordsworth was, in spite of his critics, more of a poet than of a philosopher : he had splendid flashes of insight and intuition, which he embodies in his poems rather than works them out into a flawless philosophical system. Therefore, in his critical Prefaces, though we feel that he has struck out luminous truths about poetry, and has a keen insight into its inmost secrets, yet in his theoretical exposition of them he cannot always retain that perfect and flawless consistency which is rather the fit equipment of a logical mind. In essentials, Wordsworth is almost always in the right : in details and arguments he is not unoften perversely and hopelessly wrong ; and the crudities and inaccuracies in the enunciation of his theory are sometimes reflected in his poetry, and disfigure his actual practice.

Coleridge, on the other hand, had a more formal logical and philosophical training than Wordsworth ; he was by far the more considerable reader, and traverses the past epochs of poetry with an easier and bolder sweep. While Wordsworth, in the zeal of a new discovery, sometimes fails to give its proper credit to the past, and exaggerates the degree and extent of his innovations, Coleridge tends to pull him up rather sharply by drawing his attention to similar things in former periods of literature. Coleridge sees with wonderful clear-sightedness the evils and excesses to which his friend's theory might push him, if carried to its logical extreme : he is too ready to suggest safeguards and qualifications under which the theories should be accepted ; and sometimes it cannot be denied that he pulls up the reins too tight and applies the curb too much to enable him to do full justice to the mettle of the horse he is riding. This has been the main ground of the complaint of the admirers of Wordsworth against him : he sometimes tends to miss the real originality of the ideas of Wordsworth and to minimize, though unconsciously, the significance of his discovery.



For one thing, in spite of all that has been said about Coleridge's penetrative insight and fine sympathy, he remained for ever a stranger to that mystical zone in the mind of his friend from which emanated all his apparently queer and paradoxical ideas about the superiority of rustic speech and life. He nobly appraises the more obvious excellences of Wordsworth's poetry ; but he seems never to be in full sympathy with this strain of mysticism in the greater poet. Indeed, nothing in the course of the whole controversy is more amusing than the persistent efforts of the critic to drag his poet down from his mystical heights into an arena of plain common-sense where he is obviously disinclined to strip himself. While Wordsworth glorifies rustic speech mainly because of its mystical association with the names and objects of Nature, Coleridge tilts at him in full philosophical and philological panoply, dwelling upon its obvious limitations in range and scope and subtlety and telling him very bluntly that the best part of language is derived not from the speech of rustics but from the writings of philosophers. Instances of such imperfect sympathy sometimes make us sceptical about the ideal fitness of Coleridge to interpret the work of his friend. The critic who does not cross the threshold of the mystical regions in the mind of Wordsworth is bound to remain blind to some of its most wonderful and characteristic workings, and fails to penetrate to its deepest root, where his strength and weakness lie twisted together out of sight.

The whole discussion has, therefore, to be reviewed afresh in order to strike the balance between Wordsworth and Coleridge more justly and adequately than has perhaps hitherto been done. For this purpose the language of Wordsworth's Prefaces should be followed as strictly and literally as possible both for eliciting his real meaning, and after making due allowance for the inconsistencies and self-contradictions in the enunciation of his theories which such a study may discover, to determine the



safeguards and conditions under which they are really acceptable. These theories should further be verified by a strict reference to the subject-matter and language of the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, so as to find out the deeper sense in which Wordsworth's loyalty to them is demonstrated in his riper poems. Finally, when all doubts about Wordsworth's meaning have been set at rest, an attempt should be made to estimate the absolute value of the theories and their real bearing upon poetic practice.





## II Two important pronouncements in Wordsworth's Preface

THE two most revolutionary elements in the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth, which are emphasized in the Prefaces, are

(1) that his poems are written throughout in a selection of the language really spoken by men, specially men of the middle and lower classes of society ; and

(2) that there is no essential difference between the language of prose and that of metrical composition—a general statement which implies that most of his poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* have been written in a language resembling that of prose, and stripped of any ornaments or elevations peculiar to the language of poetry. It will be noticed that the first refers to his deliberate aim having set his heart upon writing them “in a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” ; while the second involves a more general consideration about the language of *all* poetry, and follows as a corollary from Wordsworth's determination to write throughout in the real language of men in his own poems. Greater stress will naturally have to be laid upon these two points than upon any other parts of the Prefaces, which deal more or less with non-controversial matters.

With respect to the first question, we shall have to clear up what exactly Wordsworth means by “the real language of men”, and how far he actually succeeds in reproducing the speech of rustic people, or as he expresses it in the Advertisement of the First Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), “the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society”. With respect to the second question, the main interest centres on the point as to how far the language of prose is adequate to meet all the subtler ends of poetry, and is compatible with the heightening influences of rhyme and metre. Another element of absorbing interest about this latter question



is the determination of the poet's precise intention in affirming identity of language as between prose and poetry, the decision of the point as to whether by "language" he means merely the vocabulary, or the general structure of style as a whole, including order and arrangement. This point is of vital importance in enabling us to find out the real intentions of the poet in the enunciation of his theory, and thus in determining the extent of his responsibility both in respect of adherence to, and departure from, that theory. We must know aright, by a precise examination of his language, what it was that Wordsworth meant, before we can either praise him for the fulfilment, or blame him for the violation, of his pledge to the reader.

It will be seen that both the statements mentioned above have one point in common; they strip poetry of all its time-honoured privileges with respect to the use of a more splendid and heightened sort of style, and tend to bring down its language to the level of that of prose, and even of that of ordinary conversation among rustics. Wordsworth boldly denies the need of any special elevation in the language of poetry, until the very boldness of his denial leads to a reaction in the poet's own mind, and he is crossed by misgivings that his innovating zeal has possibly carried him too far. In order to save himself from the extreme consequences of his own theory, which would naturally lead to the recommendation of an absolutely bald and naked style for poetic purposes, Wordsworth hits upon a rather vague and elastic word—"selection", which would miraculously raise and dignify whatever is mean and creeping in the language of conversation and prose, and exalt it to the higher level of poetry, and thus would have the effect of nullifying and counteracting the undesirable effects of the theory he propounds. In actual practice this "selection" is found to have very little of the saving and heightening power



ascribed to it ; it allows some of the dullest and most grovelling pieces to come out of the poet's pen, without exercising any the least refining and transforming influence upon them. And in the best poems, also, its separate presence as a factor heightening the words of actual speech is scarcely to be felt and it is swallowed up in the more complex and incalculable working of the poetic imagination, from which it is found to be practically indistinguishable. Nevertheless, however great or small might be its efficacy and serviceableness in actual practice, we shall have to trace the exact connotation of this magic word with all possible care. It will tend to throw light upon Wordsworth's real conception of the glory and dignity of poetry as well as the extent of his consciousness that his theories, when taken too literally and without the safeguards naturally suggested by the poetic imagination, would have the effect of clipping the wings of poetry and making it trudge upon the low flats of uninspired conversational prose. A careful examination of the different senses in which the word "selection" is used would also go to reveal the essential weakness of Wordsworth as a dialectician.

The other topics of interest in the Prefaces are Wordsworth's famous treatment of the character and functions of a poet, in which remarks, finely suggestive and absolutely unexceptionable, have been very cleverly blended with and affiliated to his special theories; and lastly his discussions, subtly appreciative and profoundly original, about the functions of metre in poetry, which have also a bearing upon the question of language appropriate to poetry. This question will also stir up interesting discussions as to the relative importance of metre and language in poetry, and will thus enable us to decide on the propriety of the importance which Wordsworth ascribed to the question of poetic diction.

These are some of the more important topics which will





be discussed in the course of the following pages, though the greatest stress will naturally have to be laid on the question of poetic diction, which is beyond doubt of paramount importance beyond everything else in the Prefaces.



### III *Change of position from "Advertisement" to "Preface"*

IN the Advertisement to the First Edition (1798), Wordsworth speaks of the majority of his poems as "experiments . . . written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure". This seems a quite correct and straightforward characterization of the language of most of his poems dealing with rustic life, which have not been lifted to a high emotional level. Wordsworth seeks to use in them the language of conversation, although he may be very far from seizing the point and sparkle, the sharp edge and crispness of actual conversation. It is the language of conversation, if for no other reason, at any rate for a purely negative one—that it is not the higher language current in books of poetry, or used in abstruse intellectual discussions. Moreover, the poet confines himself to the conversation of "the middle and lower classes of society", because the characters in his poems are mostly drawn from these classes, and it is their language, dealing with a narrow range of ideas such as can naturally be accommodated within a rustic brain, that is consistently employed, both when they are the speakers and when the poet speaks in his own person.

In the enlarged Preface to the Second Edition, Wordsworth represents the case in a rather different manner. He speaks of the first volume of his Poems as having been published as an experiment . . . to ascertain how far a "selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" is adapted to the ends of poetry. This change in the wording can hardly be considered as an improvement. For one thing, it is quite clear that by the time when he wrote the Preface to the Second Edition, Wordsworth had grown much wiser and considerably more cautious, and was trying to give an appearance of philo-



sophical precision to his statements. He was hedging round his more extreme pronouncements by conditions and qualifications in order to make them more tenable in the judgment of his critics. But in trying to be more precise and philosophical in his statements, Wordsworth was courting another sort of danger—he was replacing his clear and straightforward manner by one of a vaguer and more abstract kind. "Language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society" is direct and intelligible enough ; it hits off with accuracy the exact language used in most of the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads*. "Real language of men" does not convey any very definite notion to the mind; and though this is subsequently expanded into a more intelligible form, "language really spoken by men", even this altered form does not make the situation quite clear. It seems to be too colourless and general a statement to be of much use for practical guidance. "Men" includes persons of all possible classes and every possible shade and degree of culture; and this "real language of men", if divested of the peculiarities belonging to the speech of different classes or localities, will be lacking in any marked distinction or individuality.

Language, considered both as vocabulary and turn of expression or style, varies according to variations of culture and refinement ; there is a sufficiently wide gulf between the speech of the unlettered peasant and that of the cultured man to make each of them stand out as a different species, though there may be an identity with respect to many of the words and elements used in them. It will make a very great difference to a poet whether he chooses to employ the "real" language of a peasant, or the equally "real" language of the educated, refined man, and under the cloak of a common word "real" Wordsworth disguises from us the very important fact as to the exact class of men whose language he is going to adopt. The language of poetry, hitherto, had, without doubt, professed to base itself on the talk of the polished



and refined man, and the best eighteenth-century poetry supplies an admirable illustration of the terse, colloquial idiom of the cultured man of the town applied to the purposes of poetry ; so that even the best eighteenth-century poetry may be said, in a sense, to have employed this "real language of men". Wordsworth's Prefaces could not have been the revolutionary manifestos that they are, if his intention had been merely to carry on this tradition in the matter of poetic language. His complaint was that, in the first place, the language of poetry had tended of late years to drift further away from actual speech, and to harden itself into a rigid stereotyped diction which could never be conceivably imagined on the lips of men, and was almost totally impervious to any genuine personal feeling. He imposed this sweeping condemnation on the whole of eighteenth-century poetry, oblivious of the fact that the remark was more applicable to the descriptive landscape poetry of the period which was coming more and more into vogue, than to the characteristic expression of the typically Augustan mind in the best satiric and didactic poems of Dryden and Pope.

It can, however, be said on behalf of Wordsworth, that during the latter half of the century, when the mantle of Dryden, Addison and Pope had fallen upon Gray and Johnson, the Augustan mind had come to lose much of its edge and sparkle. The rich colloquial idiom, the closeness to the actual speech of men, which had given so much of raciness and savour to Augustan poetry at its best, had come to be swallowed up in the sentimental melancholy, rather pompously and affectedly expressed, in the poetry of the "romanticizing group", and the heavy and ponderous moralizings of poets like Dr. Johnson, who were loyally carrying on the old Augustan tradition. And when Wordsworth illustrates the defects of eighteenth-century poetic diction and demonstrates its remoteness from, and incongruity with, the real



speech of men, it is to the poetry of Gray and Johnson, instead of to that of Dryden and Pope, that he turns quite naturally and inevitably.

His second ground of complaint, though he does not voice it forth so directly as the first, is that poetry had tended to concentrate itself too exclusively on town-life, and had neglected almost completely that rustic life to which he attaches such a mystic importance in a later part of the Preface. From this shifting of the centre of interest from the town to the country, and almost complete preoccupation with rustic subjects, it follows that with Wordsworth "the real language of men" must have meant "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society"—a fact which he explicitly mentions in the Advertisement, but which is subsequently dropped in the Preface, very likely on grounds of caution and prudence, in favour of a more vague and general sort of expression. As it was no part of Wordsworth's intention to revive the Pope tradition in the matter of language, to restore the raciness and epigrammatic condensation that marked the talk of the witty and clever man of the town, in place of the turbid eloquence and affected splendour of Gray, or the ponderous heaviness of the Johnsonian diction, he should have stated explicitly in which direction his reforms were intended to be carried, and therefore should have stuck to his more candid and outspoken declaration in the Advertisement. The change in the language, though approvingly spoken of by some Wordsworthian critics as a sign of a greater critical acuteness on the part of the poet, seems to be an unmistakable step in a retrograde direction, and to entail a loss of courage and candour without any appreciable gain in philosophical breadth and soundness.

Then again, the philosophical instincts of Coleridge are up in arms against Wordsworth for his apparently unphilosophical use of the word "real", for which he recommends the substitution of the word "ordinary".



As this so-called "real" language of Wordsworth tends to vary from parish to parish, according to the opportunities for culture and education which each may furnish, it cannot be taken to represent the fixed bed-rock, or the irreducible, unalterable basis of human speech, swept clear of all later accretions or additions. The use of the word merely betrays the hope of the poet that such a fixed bed-rock in the matter of language was attainable by the rather easy expedient of scraping off all subsequent additions made to the vocabulary under the prompting of the subtler or more refined needs of the cultured man.

The two most important changes introduced into the wording of the Prefaces are the addition of the expressions "selection" and "in a state of vivid sensation", and it is necessary to discuss their implications at some length. Both these expressions testify to the growing conviction of the poet that the actual speech of rustic people taken in its nakedness and seized without any change from the lips of talkers is unsuited to the higher ends of poetry. This represents no doubt a return to sounder views; it means a partial weakening of his faith in the self-sufficiency of unaided rustic speech, and a recognition of what is due to the rarer atmosphere of poetry. But, on the other hand, these new expressions introduce an element of vagueness and ambiguity into the theory which was hitherto put forward with such admirable straightforwardness, and become a prolific source of dispute and controversy among the readers and critics of Wordsworth. In the first place, the word "selection" brings forward an element of unknown potency into the theory and thereby tends to impair the permanent value thereof; we are left in suspense to decide as to how much of the total effect of any particular poem is to be ascribed to the virtues of "the real language of men", and how much is to be set down to the credit of the selective process.

The perplexity tends to be thickened when we consider, as we shall come to do later on, the various



and ever more and more widening senses in which the word "selection" comes to be used in the different parts of the Preface, until it becomes practically indistinguishable from what other poets would describe as imaginative creation. Then again, in actual practice this magic word "selection" seems to have accomplished little enough, for with the exception of a very few poems, *e.g. The Mad Mother* and *The Forsaken Indian Woman*, it seems to have left the language of conversation pretty much as it found it, and did not work any very appreciable changes or refinements in it. So we see that selection, where it is successfully exercised, results rather in new imaginative creation achieved without any appreciable reference to its basis in the real language of men ; and in other cases it is curiously inoperative in raising the flatness of actual speech, and seems put forward more with a view to disarming the hostility of critics than for the sake of influencing actual poetic practice. The complex issues raised by the use of the word "selection" can only be adequately tackled by a detailed reference to the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and we shall later on attempt a full examination of these poems, with the object of investigating

- (1) the conformity of their language to the actual speech of rustics,
- (2) the part played by selection in raising their language, and
- (3) the fidelity with which they reflect and illustrate the poet's peculiar views in the selection of subjects and incidents from rustic life.

The Phrase "in a state of vivid sensation", though the condition which it imposes does very little, as Coleridge demonstrates, to improve the resources of "the real language of men" and heighten its expressive power, nevertheless testifies to a growing consciousness on the poet's part as to the necessity of selecting really impor-



tant and significant episodes from rustic life as subject-matter of poetry. Every common incident does not supply the passions and emotions which alone are fit materials for poetic treatment : only the feelings of men when moved by a worthy cause, of men in a state of passionate excitement, are befitting the dignity and high emotional level of poetry. The bald, flat talk of rustic people about their ordinary everyday concerns can be but ill attuned to its nobler music and haunting cadences. But here also Wordsworth's actual practice is hardly influenced as effectively as might be desired. Although in theory he lays down the desirability of choosing the more impassioned experiences and feelings of rustic life, in his actual choice of incidents he seems hardly influenced by such a consideration. This is doubtless due to the fact that to him, imbued as he was with a strong sense of the passionate character of rustic life, a mere hint of passion, a mere suggestion of emotion was quite sufficient to determine his choice of subject-matter, and the feeling that the hint could not be actually worked out, or that the latent vein of passion could not be made explicit, exercised but little influence upon him in restricting his field of choice. This point has also been more fully elaborated in the course of the examination of the individual poems, and need not be laboured at this stage. Thus it is seen that here also the addition of the qualifying phrase, though conferring a greater soundness on the theory, is scarcely effective in influencing the poet's practice, and this mainly on account of his persistent tendency to exaggerate the element of passion in rustic life.

It has been already noticed that Wordsworth in his Preface substitutes the phrase "real language of men" for "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society" in the earlier Advertisement. It will now be seen that such a change was quite unnecessary, and was more or less a purely formal affair. For a



little later Wordsworth defines his position more clearly, and makes it apparent that his intention is to approach the "real language of men" through the avenue of rustic life. In justifying his choice of incidents from rural life he remarks (p. 14, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticisms*, by N. C. Smith, Oxford) : "the language, too, of these men [i.e. rustic people] has been adopted....." This has the effect of reducing the whole controversy to a question of words merely, and minimizes the real and practical value of the alteration. Wordsworth might be talking of "the real language of men", possibly to impart an appearance of philosophic dignity and breadth to the enunciation of his theory, but his subsequent language and conduct make it quite plain that at heart he is thinking of "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society", which are the only classes to be come across in the rustic life that he exalts and chooses as the subject-matter of his poetry.

There is one standpoint, however, from which the change of language might possibly impress one as an improvement. It is to be noted that Wordsworth speaks of the *majority* of his poems in the first volume as having been written "in the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society"—he does not extend the remark to the entire body of poems in that volume. Now the group of poems evidently covered by such a description must be that dealing with rustic life, in which either the poet himself or the rustic characters are the speakers. The description is obviously inapplicable to the other poems in the volume, those dealing with the poet's philosophy of nature, such as *Tintern Abbey*, *Lines Written in Early Spring*, *To My Sister*, *Expostulation and Reply*, and *The Tables Turned*, and poems like *The Female Vagrant* and *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, which treat of rustic topics without any attempt to reproduce the actual speech of rustic people. It is quite conceivable that with respect to these latter poems also, Wordsworth claims



an originality in the matter of language and a freedom from the unnaturalness and bombast that marked the practice of the eighteenth-century poets. According to Wordsworth, they also were written in a language which bore upon it the stamp of reality, of an authentic record of the inner vision, and as such they were poles asunder from even the most ambitious philosophical poems of the eighteenth century, whose very turgidity and bombast of style betokened a lack of reality, and of any genuine personal feeling in the poet.

Now if Wordsworth were called upon to devise one common designation for the language of both these classes of poems, it is but quite natural to think that he would seize upon a point common to the two, and this common point would no doubt be found in the note of reality which is a prominent feature of the style of everything that Wordsworth wrote. The title of "real language of men" could thus be claimed equally on behalf of the rustic poems, as well as of those dealing with the philosophy of nature, though the one was written in a commonplace, grovelling style, and the other rose to the highest flights of grandeur. It is from this standpoint that we can justify the poet's substitution of the phrase "real language of men" for "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society", as in spite of its tendency to vagueness and abstraction, it may be taken to be the more comprehensive term of the two, embracing and covering as it does the two-fold note that can be distinguished in the style of Wordsworth in the *Lyrical Ballads*.



#### IV "Selection"—its scope and effectiveness

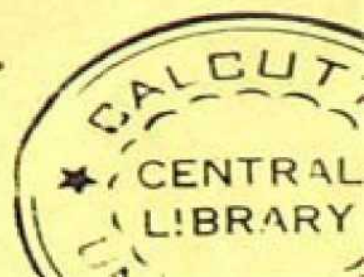
BEFORE taking up the complex problems raised by the introduction of the word "selection", it is necessary to define the scope within which the selective process is applicable. The first use of the word is, as has been seen, in connection with "the real language of men"—a phrase applicable both to poems dealing with rustic life and also to the other poems of the *Lyrical Ballads* which are loftier in range of thought and feeling. To which of the two classes of poems is the selective process specially intended to apply? The language of the latter class of poems—poems dealing with nature or pitched in a semi-conversational key, as *Expostulation and Reply*, *The Tables Turned*, *To My Sister*, and *A Poet's Epitaph*—is frankly above the reach of rustic intellect; it is the expression of the deep and subtle thoughts that can only be entertained by a cultured and refined mind. These poems, in their language, rather bear upon the other theory of Wordsworth—the one about the identity in respect of language between prose and poetry; and though selection has been affirmed as necessary both with respect to the language of prose (see VIII) and also to rustic speech, it is clear that it cannot be so prominent and indispensable in the former case as in the latter. Prose, specially good and well-written prose (to the language of which Wordsworth affiliates that of poetry), does not stand so much in need of selection as rustic speech, which tends to stumble and meander, and has therefore to be tightened and screwed up before it can be fit for the higher ends of poetry. Again, if, in the affirmation of identity between the language of prose and that of poetry, the poet merely means that the words of prose can be taken over quite unchanged into the sphere of poetry, then it is obvious that selection can have but a very narrow scope of operation in such cases. It cannot act to bring about any material structural



alteration, if it is exercised upon *words* only. It can either be an instinctive and infallible choice of words which combine expressiveness with simplicity—in which case it loses itself in the inscrutable mystery of imaginative creation or reduces itself merely to a mechanical device to sort out the simpler words which have as little of the traditional pomp and splendour of poetry as possible. Hence for all practical purposes the selective process is confined to the rustic poems alone, and it is in connection with them that its efficacy or otherwise is to be specially inquired into.

Now, with respect to these poems written in the ordinary speech of rustic people, the question to consider is to ascertain the limits within which the selective process is to be applied. On the one hand, selection must involve a real sifting or modification of the spoken language; on the other hand, the peculiar rustic accent must be preserved intact. The phrase “language really used by men” suggests without doubt that the mere *elements of speech or vocabulary* could not have been meant, for a mere picking out of the simple words or expressions actually used by, or intelligible to, men in low or rustic life does not necessarily amount to an imitation of their language; for language caught from the lips of people means the general cast of the style, its total effect and peculiarity of structure, rather than the individual words into which it can be broken up. The word “selection” can have a meaning only when applied to style in its entirety, and not as split up into its component elements; for then it would resolve itself into a mere mechanical sifting out of the simpler, monosyllabic words; and the arrangement of these words may, in practice, turn out something widely different from the actual speech of rustics, and put on an entirely different complexion.

Then again, selection must not be carried so far as to obliterate all traces of the rustic flavour, to make it impossible for us to recognize that it was actually caught





from the lips of rustic speakers ; the poet must not substitute an entirely new form of speech under cover of the selective process. Selection must content itself with a pruning of the irrelevancies and repetitions so tiresome in the actual speech of rustics, and checking the tendency so pronounced in them of shooting off at a tangent and of resorting to odd angles of approach in entering upon a subject. But something of the original twist, of the turns and tortuosities of rustic speech, albeit in a heightened or more expressive form, must survive the process of selection. Again, a crude and unrefined transplantation of rustic speech to the field of poetry would be, unless justified by dramatic needs, unpoetic : the twist would be too pronounced to fit in with the gentle and calculated curve of metrical composition, and the result would be that we would have plenty of rustic speech without anything of poetry. The true problem is to reconcile and harmonize these conflicting elements ; to retain the rustic flavour, and at the same time fit it to the needs of poetry.

The above discussion tends to indicate the limits within which the selective process can be applied to rustic speech so as to make it fit for poetry—pruning its worst defects on the one hand, and retaining its essential individuality on the other. Now the question is : How far does Wordsworth satisfy these conditions in his use of rustic language ?

If we now turn to the rustic poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, we find that Wordsworth offends against both the conditions laid down above. In the first place, however glibly he might talk of “selection” in the course of the enunciation of his theory, in practice he feels called upon to exercise it but very rarely in his poems. It is evident to any impartial reader who is not obsessed by the special theories of Wordsworth about the passionate intensity of rustic speech that there is very little of the selective process to be traced in the language of such poems as



*Simon Lee*, or *The Childless Father*, or even *The Thorn*. He is but too ready to take rustic speech at its lowest and flattest level and incorporate it, almost unchanged, into his poetry. In his flat and uninspired moments he pours forth crude, unconnected details without lifting them over to the higher atmosphere of poetry. This is the most usual method in which he maintains a semblance of approximation to rustic speech in his poetic language.

Very often he tends to make matters worse by neglecting to make any discrimination between the dramatic and narrative devices, between occasions when he speaks in his own person and those when he makes his rustic characters speak. He sticks literally to the words of the Preface, by employing "throughout ..... the language really used by men" ; and attempts to carry on the whole poem in the tiresome, discursive narrative method in which illiterate, uncultured people wind in and out of any story they may have to tell. Indeed, this method is so habitual with him that it is impossible to distinguish cases where the poet speaks in his own person from those in which he is vicariously tedious, having adopted a dramatic device. It is this which makes Wordsworth's special communication in the case of *The Thorn* that here he is impersonating a loquacious old sailor so utterly meaningless and mirth-provoking to the reader. After all, there is little difference between *The Thorn* and *Simon Lee* so far as narrative method is concerned. Thus we see that his obsession with rustic speech tends to react fatally upon his general sense of style. Not only does he fail to apply the selective process adequately to speeches actually put into the mouth of rustic people, but under a false sense of its inherent poetic power—a point that is presently to be discussed—he is led to extend it to his own comments and interpretations, where a more heightened style might have been more justifiably adopted.

To the real points of contact between rustic speech



and the higher language of poetry and passion, such as we come across in the poetry of Burns, or the rich, colloquial idiom put into the mouths of rustic speakers in some novels, e.g. the speeches of Meg Merrilies in Scott's *Guy Mannering*, or of Mrs. Berry in Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Wordsworth is all but completely insensible.

Turning, in the next place, to poems in which Wordsworth has undoubtedly triumphed, we are crossed by doubts as to whether in these cases the rustic flavour has survived, and whether the heightening process that has certainly been applied can be best designated under the name "selection". In some of his most poetical pieces (e.g. in the Lucy poems) he offers us simple words no doubt, such as might conceivably have been used by rustic speakers, but touched to finer issues, a rarer degree of expressiveness—a language which is really an unrecognizable recombination of the elements of rustic, or, for the matter of that, of any speech. In his inspired moments, when he achieves really great effects out of homely subjects and simple words and ideas, the process employed seems to be something much higher than mere selection—it amounts in fact to a new imaginative creation altogether.

No doubt, in the case of such poems, e.g. *The Mad Mother*, *The Forsaken Indian Woman*, *Michael*, Wordsworth makes a special effort to confine himself to such words and ideas as might reasonably be expected to come within the range of a rustic mind, and to connect the passion with images and figures most likely to be familiar to rural people. Therefore his best imaginative achievements have a touch of veracity and simplicity about them which heightens their effect all the more, a note of intensity attained by the severe restrictions under which the poet works. But in what sense other than that of a vital imaginative creation can we apply the word "selection" to such lines as the following—



The breeze I see is in the tree,  
It comes to cool my babe and me.

*The Mad Mother, or Her Eyes are Wild, Stanza-4-*

OR

In sleep I heard the northern gleams ;  
The stars they were among my dreams.

*The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman, Stanza 1.*

In lines like these it is a poet marshalling the words and ideas of rustic people so as to wrest out of them the highest and the most vivid poetic effects, and bringing about strange, unwonted combinations between images and feelings which would never have suggested themselves to the rustic people who are the supposed speakers in these poems. "Selection" is a term that hardly suffices to cover all these strange processes of imaginative transmutation ; and these vivid and arresting images do not belong to rustic speech as it is in itself, but have been inwoven into its texture by the imagination of the poet.

*Michael*, and to a less extent *The Brothers*, seem to be the only poems in which an unwonted grandeur has been breathed into a style that appears indistinguishable from actual rustic speech, and thus the word "selection" is apparently more appropriate as applied to the language of these poems. But in reality the language in one of them at least—*Michael*—presents examples of a still greater marvel in the art of transformation than in any other poem of Wordsworth, the speech of old Michael being something immeasurably higher than that of an average rustic, and catching its spirit of austere reticence and stern repression of emotion from the very mountains among which his lot was cast. The poet reproduces with marvellous power this hidden suggestion of strength and subtle emanation of passion behind the naked and simple words that are used. Thus here also we are ill reconciled to the use of the word "selection" as offering an adequate explanation of the undoubted triumphs of the poet in the manipulation of rustic speech.



Now, let us advert to the reason which prevented Wordsworth from applying an adequate measure of selection in the case of his rustic poems. He does not seem to be very keenly alive to the peculiar difficulties in the application of the selective process, but tacitly takes it for granted that it is one of the easiest things to accomplish. This must have been due, in a large measure, to an intuitive faith on his part that the actual speech of rustic people has a greater innate fitness to be the language of poetry than has been borne out in the practice of poets. The very fact that he allowed the naked and flat language of such poems as *Simon Lee* or *The Childless Father* to pass without undergoing any perceptible heightening process shows that in his opinion it was poetical enough, and did not stand in need of any such process. Just as in the selection of incidents and situations, the bare hint of passion, a remote suggestion of pathos, was quite enough to influence his choice, so in the matter of language too, a bare enumeration of details, or a matter-of-fact recital of a bald narrative had for him the genuine poetic accent or the right sort of imaginative thrill. A mystic halo rested, for Wordsworth, upon the trivial in language and the common-place in incident, merely for their association with rustic life; and this blinded him almost completely to the impression they would be calculated to leave upon the uninitiated among his readers.

Coleridge, as was to be expected from his imperfect sympathy with Wordsworth's mystic faith in rustic life, falls into the pardonable error of underestimating the importance of the selective process. Frankly speaking, he was no believer in the virtues of "selection", and he possibly carries his scepticism to a quite unconscionable extreme. He conceives of "selection" as something calculated to neutralize the peculiarities of rustic speech, and a somewhat covert and not very honest device of reducing it to the refined and cultured language that is



the usual instrument of expression in poetry. He also disbelieves in the unity or real individuality of rustic speech ; it is a thing liable to vary from parish to parish, and that on purely accidental grounds, and does not necessarily bear upon it the stamp of the rustic's occupations and pursuits, and of his deepest and most intimate feelings. He further speaks of it as a mere mutilated and imperfect instrument of expression, differing purely for the worse from the speech of the cultured man, marked off from it by the narrower range of its ideas as well as a greater tendency to inconsequence and discursiveness. On the whole, he is quite unwilling to ascribe any positive virtues to it ; and as such is apt to look askance at the efficacy of selection, as applied to such a poor, meagre and halting form of speech. Obviously he did not set much store by the poems of Burns ; or at any rate looked upon him as a prodigy, a sort of *Sui generis*, unlikely to be the founder of a poetic dynasty or to bequeath his style as a legacy to future generations of poets. And finally he brings matters to a head by denying that the language, which will come into being after its purification from redundancies and provincialisms and which Wordsworth has in his view, can be attributed to rustics with any greater right "than the style of Hooker or Bacon to Tom Browne or Sir Roger L'Estrange" (Mackail, *Coleridge's Literary Criticism*, p. 42).

Coleridge, as we can now all feel, was unjust in all this. He was wrong in holding that rustic speech had no positive virtues of its own ; still more perverse in his opinion that it was not possible to apply selection to rustic speech without destroying its peculiarity and converting it to the ordinary type of refined or cultured speech. "Omit the peculiarities of each and the result of course must be common to all" (Mackail, *Coleridge's Literary Criticism*, p. 43). There is, as a matter of fact, a sharp and pronounced individuality in the style of every great writer, though he draws upon a vocabulary that is common



to all cultured people and to all his fellow-practitioners of the literary craft. It is quite easy to distinguish the style of Matthew Arnold from that of Pater, though they are both presumably manipulating the same materials, the same elements of vocabulary. If Coleridge's contention were true, then no style could possibly have retained its distinctive individuality.

The most scathing condemnation of Coleridge on this point has perhaps come from Garrod in his *Lectures and Essays* : "Wordsworth"<sup>1</sup> (pp. 163-165). His remarks are as follows : "Coleridge urges that 'a language which has been submitted to this selective process will, in the result, not differ from the language of any other man of common sense'. Hazlitt ..... said that Coleridge had reduced the merit of Wordsworth to this—'that there is nothing peculiar about him, and that his poetry, so far as it is good for anything at all, is just like any other good poetry'. This, we can now see, is an understatement. Coleridge, in fact, drags Wordsworth to the position that there is "nothing peculiar" about poetry (more correctly, the language of poetry?). Wordsworth's answer is apparent. 'The poet who composes in a selection from the real language of man' escapes 'the language of any other man of common sense' in the exact degree in which he is a poet. What Wordsworth says of 'selection' is not a timorous qualification, not a sly afterthought, but something essential, not merely to his theory of poetic diction, but to his whole teaching ..... upon the subject of imaginative creation. The language of poetry must be real, a true and not a false language ; but by the same necessity (for it is to be poetry ) it must be, and will be, not the language of 'common sense', but so much of the real language of men as will 'make up into' imagination ..... Just as poetry cannot work upon the objects offered to it by sense ( but they must submit to a selecting and universalizing process), so it cannot

<sup>1</sup> Clarendon Press, 1923.



work with the language of common sense, the language offered to it by real life. The language of poetry is to 'the language really spoken by men' exactly as the objects which the imagination visualizes are to their correlates in the sphere of sense. In both classes, the imagination renders back purified and dignified what came to it, through eye and ear, confused and ignoble. The selection is to be made by that Power which in poetry 'lifts the mean matter of the senses into a spiritual reality'."

All this is admirably said. This is indeed a very laudable attempt to tone down whatever is unbalanced and exaggerated in Wordsworth's theory, and bring it into line with the most orthodox and unexceptionable conceptions of the functions of the poetic imagination. According to this interpretation, Wordsworth, while insisting on the use in poetry of the language really spoken by men, was at the same time fully conscious of its defects and crudities and keenly alive to the necessity of an imaginative transfiguration being brought to bear upon it. But can it be honestly said that all this can be legitimately inferred from Wordsworth's language in the Preface? As a matter of fact, he studiously keeps out of sight this necessity of an imaginative idealization of the real speech of man, and instead glorifies actual speech of rustics to such an extent as to produce the impression that it stands very little in need of imaginative heightening. He even proceeds further than this, claiming for the actual speech of men in moments of passion a degree of perfection which is but faintly reproduced in the language of poetry. "However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious that while he describes and imitates passion, his employment is in some degree mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering" (N. C. Smith, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, p. 24).

From this it would seem to follow that the indebtedness



is all on the side of poetry, and that the actual speech of men in its expression of strong emotions has nothing to gain from the refining or idealizing process of the poetic imagination. Poetry struggles to follow, and struggles ineffectually, where real passion has given the lead ; and it tends to fall short, as all imitations are apt to do, of the original. If Wordsworth had admitted frankly and unequivocally the existence of a gulf between poetry and the actual speech of man on which it is founded, and had actually realized in his poems that imaginative transfiguration of which his advocates speak, then it is quite certain that the controversy on the Prefaces would have raged neither so long nor so loud. Coleridge, therefore, with all his tendency to proceed to the opposite extreme, had, it must be admitted, some amount of justification in thinking that selection implied a more or less mechanical process of sifting or elimination and not a thoroughgoing imaginative transformation.

And after all, Coleridge had some excuse for taking all this talk about selection as mere moonshine, when in practice it often merely amounted to a cutting up of the bare speech of rustics into lines and adjusting them, very indifferently indeed, to the needs of metre. Who that reads these lines from *The Thorn* can ever think of selection as embodying any, even the most distant, approach to imaginative heightening?

No more I know, I wish I did,  
And I would tell it all to you :  
For what became of this poor child  
There's none that ever knew :  
And if a child was born or no,  
There's no one that could ever tell,  
And if it was born alive or dead,  
There's no one knows, as I have said :  
But some remember well,  
That Martha Ray about this time  
Would up the mountain often climb.

This is sending back the real language of men, not dignified



and purified by the imagination, but in all its native Babel-like clatter and dissonance!

The other aspects and implications of "selection" will be taken up in a later section (VIII), in connection with the part it plays in bringing about an identity between the language of prose and poetry and its subtle interaction with metre and the mood of the poet's mind in leading on to poetic creation.



## V Identity between the language of Prose and Poetry

It is time now to turn to the second of the two important pronouncements made by Wordsworth on the point of poetic diction, the one about the identity in point of language between prose and poetry. It is to be noted that as far as his determination to use the actual language of rustic people, with whatever of "selection" or modification, in his *Lyrical Ballads* is concerned, Wordsworth does not pretend to lay it down as a universal proposition applicable to all kinds of poetry. He frankly speaks of it as an experiment initiated by him for the first time, and with reference to only a certain class of topics, and has no intentions of extending this style to poetry dealing with other topics. And although behind this apparent moderation there is hidden a real conviction of the superiority of the new vein of poetry opened out by him, still it does not emerge very often to the surface. The very idea of writing a full-length Preface for explaining his special view and combating the prejudices of the reader springs, of course, from a growing sense of the poet as to the importance of the poems in which they are embodied ; but it is only fair to observe that this claim is put forward not so much on the ground of style as on the new kinds of moral interests and relations which they tend to bring to light (see N. C. Smith, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, pp. 11—12). And his exaltation of the glories of rustic speech, which he acclaims as the most permanent and philosophical language on account of its habitual association with the names and objects of nature and its expression of deep, heart-felt and regular feelings, does not urge him to plead for its extension beyond its natural boundaries.

In speaking of the *style* of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth gives us a little more detailed information over and above the fact that it is a "selection from the language of real life". He tells us that he has



sedulously avoided personifications of abstract ideas and conventional poetic diction, and steadily cultivated the habit of accurate and faithful description in his poems (Smith, pp. 17—18)— devices all calculated to purge poetic style of its extravagance and unreality and bring it nearer to the “real language of men”. His achievements and avoidances, to be sure, are both conceived of as adding to the expressive power and fidelity to real life of the rustic language which he employs. But in spite of all these claims made on its behalf, and his persistent tendency to look upon it as a very truthful and delicate instrument of expression, Wordsworth does not openly raise rustic speech into an ideal style of poetry, or one of universal applicability either. So far as his remarks about rustic speech are concerned, practical application is beyond doubt of more moment than theoretical enunciation. Wordsworth stands or falls not by the soundness of his theories with respect to them but by his success in applying them to practice.

The second theory of Wordsworth relating to identity in language between prose and poetry stands on a far different footing. Here Wordsworth claims to advance a theory of universal application, one which is intended to hold good of all kinds of poetry. At this stage of his Preface, the poet ceases to talk of his own poems alone, and soars into universal considerations as to the kind of language suitable for poetry in general. He begins by saying that he does not subscribe to the view that the language of poetry must at all costs differ from that of prose, even when the identity is attained without any sacrifice of special poetic beauties. He follows this up with the remark that poetry, even in its most inspired passages, uses a language in no wise differing from that of *good* and *well-written* prose, and quotes a Sonnet from Gray from which he tries to maintain that the best lines are those in which the language of prose has been used.



This leads on to a still bolder generalization that "there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and that of verse".

This is, in the briefest outline, the position of Wordsworth, as well as an indication of the steps by which he arrives at that position. We shall next attempt, by a detailed discussion of the exact words used by Wordsworth in this part of the Preface, to determine what he really means by this assertion to which he seems to lift himself through such a process of bold crescendo, as it were.



## VI Does "*Identity*" refer to "*vocabulary*" only or to "*order*" as well?

THE most important question for discussion here is whether, in affirming the identity between the *language* of poetry and that of prose, Wordsworth is merely referring to a question of *vocabulary*, or of *style as a whole, including order and arrangement*. Unfortunately Wordsworth's own expressions are too vague to admit of a definite decision on the point. Coleridge's controversy is throughout based on the assumption that Wordsworth's meaning was to insist on a conformity to *prose order and style* on the part of poetry; for, as he acutely remarks, to affirm this conformity only of the elements of style or *the vocabulary* is to offer a truism under the guise of a paradox, though this truism unquestionably came to suffer a temporary eclipse in the practice of the eighteenth-century poets. The present-day admirers of Wordsworth resent this assumption of Coleridge, and try to make out, from a strict interpretation of the actual language in the Preface, that Wordsworth was never going beyond the question of vocabulary, and if this leads him to the utterance of a truism, well, truism, at any rate, is to be preferred to absurdity. In this strain of argument one can perhaps trace an over-great anxiety to shield the poet, even by sacrificing the really original and fruitful element in his theory. For this position (*viz.* that Wordsworth intended to refer to vocabulary merely) can be established not off-hand and with absolute ease, as the defenders of Wordsworth seem to think, but only by a balancing of many fine and delicate points extraneous to, and independent of, the language in the Prefaces, which, by itself, is by no means conclusive and leaves our judgment in suspense up to the very end. We propose to examine this question as to whether by *language* Wordsworth means "*vocabulary*", or "*order and arrangement*" as well, from the following points of view :



1. We shall, first of all, examine *the context* in which the theory is enunciated to find out whether that sheds any light on Wordsworth's real meaning.

2. We shall then subject the actual language of the Prefaces to as searching a scrutiny as possible, discussing at the same time the critical soundness and practical implication of every statement ; but, as has already been said, we cannot expect any definite results from this source alone, unless we look wider, and indulge in a broader survey of the situation.

3. In order to attain to a more definite conclusion, we shall, then, refer to the practice of contemporary poets and to current critical opinions of the subject of poetry. As Wordsworth's protest was inspired by the faults prevalent in contemporary poetry, a careful examination of these faults as illustrated in the practice of eighteenth-century poets will certainly throw light on the question as to whether Wordsworth's attack was directed against the *vocabulary* of poetry only, or its *order and arrangement* as well. A survey of eighteenth-century poetry from this standpoint will thus help in inclining the balance definitely to one side or the other, and will tend to establish, with a tolerable degree of certainty, the precise intention of the poet, which was left undetermined by the language he used.

4. This will be followed up by an examination of the critical soundness of either position. Wordsworth might have meant to insist on a conformity to the *mere language* of prose or *its order and arrangement also* on the part of poetry. Our object will be to find out which of the two alternatives leads to a sounder critical position, and is more in consonance with the facts of poetic history and the actual practice of poets. Insistence on *prose words* or on *prose order as well* in poetry—which of these two offers the more feasible or practicable condition for the poet to follow? This will also lead on to a determination of the limits within which either position is acceptable in poetry, as



well as of the excesses and exaggerations to which each is likely to lead and which are accordingly to be guarded against in practice.

5. Lastly, an analysis of the Sonnet of Gray which is inserted in full in Wordsworth's Preface both to illustrate the faults of a vicious poetic diction as also to support his own contention as to the identity of language between prose and poetry, will serve as a decisive factor in clearing up the poet's meaning, for practical application of a theory is of much help in elucidating whatever might have been obscure in its enunciation.

### 1. CONTEXT

An examination of the paragraph immediately preceding the enunciation of Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction has an important bearing on the question under discussion. Just before the enunciation of the theory, Wordsworth takes care to apprise the reader of "a few circumstances relating to the *style*" of his poems, in order that he may know what the poet has really aimed at. He says that he has carefully avoided some of the habitual devices resorted to by poets, some of the traditional tricks of poetic style—specially, personifications of abstract ideas, on the ground of securing conformity to the very language of man. He has also written with a steady eye on the object, and cultivated precision of language and fidelity in the matter of observation. The natural effect of all these "omissions and commissions" has been that the language of many of his poems is, as a matter of fact, indistinguishable from that of prose, and then Wordsworth sets himself to prove that, not merely in his poems but in all poetry generally, conformity to the language of prose is quite compatible with the highest effects of poetry.

From the context it is clear that Wordsworth was discussing certain features of the *style* of his poems. His avoidance of personifications of abstract ideas, as well as of what he designates as "conventional poetic



diction" left him nothing but the bare, ordinary *words* of prose as instruments of expression in his poems ; and he naturally apprehends the wrath of the critics for his use of these commonplace, unadorned, prosaic *words*, and makes haste to show that these words are quite in their place in poetry. Moreover, as in the last paragraph he was dealing with the question of general style, it is but reasonable to believe that in the following paragraph he would pass on to a fresh aspect of the subject, *viz.* : the question of *vocabulary*, instead of merely repeating himself.

It is, however, possible to urge with almost equal plausibility that even here Wordsworth is thinking of *style* as a whole, as the natural effect of denying himself the customary graces and adornments of poetic style would be to bring down the style of his poems to the level of prose, and this lowering of the level would naturally be resented by his critics.

Thus we see that the context does not help us very much in reaching any definite conclusion as to Wordsworth's meaning, though the uncertainty here lies not between *vocabulary* and *order* but between *vocabulary* and *general style*.

The balance of probability in this instance, however, seems to incline to the side of *vocabulary* as against *style*; for Wordsworth's real contention is that the use of prose *words* does not, as a matter of fact, lead to any lowering of the poetic level, and that a mere sight of them tends to frighten the critics who have learned to associate poetry with a more gaudy kind of phraseology. The critics, he insinuates, do not take the trouble, or are not in a position, to ascertain if this apprehended lowering of level has really been brought to pass : their inveterate prejudices anticipate their mature judgment, and are up in arms against the simple homely words on the ground of the antecedent improbability of their serving as worthy custodians of the dignity of poetry.

In reality much of the difficulty of the situation consists



in the fact that the language of Wordsworth is capable of either kind of interpretation, and thus does not go far enough towards the clearing up of the original obscurity. And, as a matter of fact, it is rather arbitrary to separate the question of *style* from that of vocabulary—a result which would ensue even if we accept the view, favourable to Wordsworth's position, that he was referring merely to the *words*. *Vocabulary* and *style* are so intimately inter-related that the one is bound, quite naturally, to lead up to the other, and it is almost impossible to treat either of them as a quite self-contained or absolutely independent question. The vital weakness of Wordsworth's position, as will be seen later on, lies in his futile attempt to isolate the question of *vocabulary*—if that was what he really aimed at—and to shut out all its wider implications and bearings on the question of general style: and the futility of his attempt is shown by the persistency with which this wider element intrudes itself into the discussion, and defies all attempts on the poet's part to keep it out.

## 2. THE LANGUAGE OF THE PREFACE

Then let us take up the actual words used by Wordsworth and try to find out the construction of which they are naturally capable. As has already been remarked, no very decisive results are to be expected from this examination; for Wordsworth's language is of such an ambiguous character that taken by itself it may, without much difficulty, be made to support either of the two different views. Therefore, in the last resort, we shall have to refer to other evidence in order to find out the real intention of the poet, whom we must credit with the intelligence of having advocated the more sensible view—one that is comparatively less open to objection and is suggested directly by contemporary conditions of poetry, when his actual language does not indicate anything to the contrary.



It has already been said that if language is used in the sense of *vocabulary* merely and is not taken to include *order and arrangement*, then the affirmation of identity between the language of prose and that of verse loses much of its striking and original character, and tends to become merely the statement of an old truth which had never been denied in theory, though it might have been neglected in practice; whereas, on the other hand, if *order and arrangement* are also meant, then it would constitute a valuable addition to our ideas about poetic diction to know the condition under, and the extent up to, which *the prose choice and the prose order of words* are admissible in poetry. Moreover, it is extremely doubtful whether the employment of the mere words of prose, unaccompanied by prose order, will really serve in bringing poetry into line with prose; and if Wordsworth's real intention was to discover the poetic properties of prose forms of speech and thus to establish a stronger kinship between them than is generally admitted—as his use of colloquial language in the *Lyrical Ballads* might very well lead us to believe—he must in that case have stipulated for *order* over and above the *words* which belong exclusively neither to poetry nor to prose. Hence, in our interpretation, we should first of all try to see how far we can include this wider meaning, involving prose order, and should fall back upon the narrower sense, only if insuperable difficulties present themselves in the way.

There are three statements of Wordsworth which it is proposed to examine in this connection. They have already been set forth in the preceding section (V) but may just as well be recapitulated here for convenience of reference :

(a) The first remark of Wordsworth is to the effect that there are critics who would condemn a poem, if only a series of lines or even a single line in it happens not to differ in its *language* from the language of



prose, *though naturally arranged and according to the laws of metre.*

(b) His next statement is that a large portion of every good poem, of the most elevated character and even in its most inspired passages, is written in a *language* in no wise differing from that of *good and well-written* prose. This is sought to be illustrated from a Sonnet of Gray, in which Wordsworth tries to prove that the best lines are those in which the language of prose has been followed. From this single example Wordsworth passes to a rather bold and ill-warranted generalization that

(c) there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the *language* of prose and that of verse. Let us take up each of these sentences in order.

(a) Wordsworth begins with the remark that there are many critics who would condemn a poem, if only a series of lines or even a single line in it happens not to differ in its *language* from the *language* of prose, *though natural arrangement and metrical laws have been conformed to.* The poet's real intention in this passage is to imply that some critics are so unreasonable as to condemn any conformity on the part of poetry to prose in point of *words or words and arrangement*, even when this conformity is attained *without any sacrifice of the special poetic effect.* But unfortunately, his words are not as exhaustive or unequivocal as might be desired. *Natural arrangement and conformity to metrical laws* do not exhaust all possible kinds of poetic effect ; and compliance with these conditions may involve the surrender of some subtler poetic grace lying deeper beyond the reach of metre and arrangement, hidden, for aught we know, as an impalpable essence, within the suggestiveness of *words.* Moreover, the ambiguity of the passage also lies, as we have seen, in the determination of the exact meaning of the term "*language*". Let us take "*language*" in its wider sense, *including the prose choice as well as the prose order of words.*



and try to find out whether this leads to any difficult or untenable position in the interpretation of the passage as a whole.

The passage, then, will come to mean : Some critics of poetry carry their antipathy to prose so far that they would object to even a single line in a poem which follows prose in the *words and order*, though *this order* constituted the most natural arrangement for the line, and the *words and order* in their joint effect satisfied all the laws of metre, *i.e.* the distribution of the pauses and accents, including possibly the general rhythmic quality. "*Naturally arranged*" obviously means "without a deviation from the most spontaneous and thus the most effective mode of arrangement", and although arrangement according to prose order is not always the most natural arrangement of words in poetry, involving, as it may, a sacrifice of metrical fitness and rhythmic harmony, and producing an effect of flatness which is felt to be out of keeping with the higher levels of poetry, yet there are occasions when the most effective arrangement, from the standpoint of both sense and harmony, happens to coincide with prose order ; and in such cases prose order is followed quite spontaneously, and not with any conscious thought or predetermination on the part of the poet, and as such should be treated as quite unexceptionable.

In the preceding paragraph we have *assumed* that "language" in the sentence under discussion covers "words" as well as "order" ; but there is something in the sentence itself that countenances such a view without the necessity of any assumption on our part. The very conditions inserted by the poet, "though *naturally arranged and according to the laws of metre*", seem to imply that Wordsworth is thinking not of vocabulary merely but also of the *order or arrangement of words* ; for "natural arrangement" has nothing to do with the question of *vocabulary*, and metrical laws, though reacting on the *choice* of words to a certain extent, are equally concerned



with their *order*, or the general rhythmic flow of the line according to fixed laws of syllabic arrangement and accent-distribution. These conditions have, therefore, a more natural relation or affinity with the question of *order* than of *vocabulary*. Different conditions would no doubt have been inserted if the poet's intention had been to stress *the words or elements of vocabulary* exclusively. Some such substitute as "though neither dull and inexpressive, nor unsuited to the needs of metre" might have brought out the exact shade of meaning more unequivocally.

An important point for consideration with respect to this statement would be the fairness of the charge levelled in it against the critics of the time—whether they had really that extreme aversion both to *prose order* and *prosaic words* in poetry which Wordsworth here attributes to them, and whether, even if the double antipathy could be brought home to them, their position was really as untenable as Wordsworth takes it to be. The real justification of the remark will be in its correspondence both with facts and reasons, and this aspect of the question will be discussed under (3).

It would, no doubt, argue a special depravity of taste on the part of critics to take exception to such lines as these, which do not go out of their way in seeking alliance with prose both in its order and words, unless, as it will be seen later on, they did it on the higher ground of style, of a general lowness of imaginative and emotional level. But this latter possibility seems altogether absent from Wordsworth's thoughts : apparently he cannot conceive of the objection of the critics as resting on any other ground but a rooted antipathy to prose and an inveterate conviction that poetry must shun any approach to prose at all costs.

Now let us see how the passage stands if *language* is taken in the narrower sense of "*words*" only. In that case Wordsworth might have possibly meant to convey that the objection of the critics was directed exclusively



against the prosaic words when no other ground of complaint remained, either on the score of *arrangement*, or on that of *conformity to metrical laws*. In other words, the critics were so unreasonable as to take exception to the *words* used by the poet, merely because they were simple and homely, identical with those which are in common use in prose, though this identity was not followed by any awkwardness in their arrangement or in the manipulation of metre. In this case awkwardness in arrangement and failure to conform to metrical needs must be considered as separate defects, independent of the question of vocabulary. Prose choice of words is, by itself, considered as a defect, though the demands made by the other aspects of the poet's craft have been met quite successfully.

This position is comparatively easier to follow, and here also, as in the case of the wider interpretation, it will have to be seen whether it is supported by the actual state of critical taste and poetic practice of the eighteenth century. But even judging the statement on its own merits we have reason to doubt whether the attitude of the critics is really so unreasonable and lacking in justification as the tone of Wordsworth might be taken to suggest. Wordsworth's argument, in short, amounts to this : critics object to the *words* as prosaic, though their *arrangement* is natural and consonant with metrical fitness. In other words, supposing that *three* conditions have to be fulfilled in good poetry, the observance of *two* of them is put forward as an excuse for the neglect of the *third*. Natural arrangement and compliance with metrical laws do not absolve the poet from the need of the right choice of words. The critics may rightly object to the words, not on the ground that they are identical with those in common use in prose, but that they are too flat and feeble for the higher atmosphere of poetry.

Thus judged from this point of view the objection of the critics is found to be quite reasonable. Natural



arrangement and satisfaction of the laws of metre are more or less formal and technical requisites of poetry, and may easily be found in company with a feeble soul or weak imaginative power in it. They may not always ensure the right choice of words : and when the general style is found to be prosaic, and of a low and creeping level, the effect is rightly attributed to the words. The fact that the poet has fulfilled some conditions constitutes, as we have already seen, no defence for his neglect of a yet more vital condition. Thus it is quite possible to hold that the condemnation of *words* in poetry naturally arranged and metrically fit, which do not differ from those of prose, may rest on the ground of their feeble imaginative power, on grounds other than that of a blind craze for "poetric diction", which is the only possibility Wordsworth has in view in his horrified repudiation of such a canon of criticism.

Thus our discussion of the (a) first statement of Wordsworth does not carry us very far towards the elucidation of the meaning of the word "language", as it seems to lend itself with almost equal ease and readiness to both the interpretations. We can, however, venture on the conclusion that the balance of probability just inclines to the side of the wider interpretation, if we exclusively confine ourselves to the sense of the passage without looking further afield. (i) In the first place, the very insertion of the condition "naturally arranged" shows that Wordsworth's mind must have been thinking of *order* ; (ii) secondly, the phrase does not quite fit in with the narrower sense, "*natural arrangement*" being rather arbitrarily put forward as a compensation for "prosaic words"—a position much more weak and untenable on the part of Wordsworth ; and (iii) if Wordsworth had intended to bring the pretensions of the critics to utter contempt and ridicule—as he evidently had—it would be to his interest to exaggerate their perversity and attribute to them extreme views—not, of course, in a spirit of intentional



unfairness, but in the mere impatience of controversy and restlessness of overhasty generalization, though this could not stand the test of a closer scrutiny of facts. This tentative finding will, however, have to be checked and corrected in the light of the remarks that follow, as well as of wider considerations which will have to be taken into account at a later stage.

Let us continue the discussion with respect to the other statements of Wordsworth. The use of the word "prosaisms" (the plural form) later on in the same sentence points rather to *vocabulary* than to *order*.

(b) The next statement of Wordsworth bearing on this point is to the effect that the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, and of some parts of poems specially informed with poetic quality ("most interesting parts") is identical with the language of prose, when prose is good or well written. This sentence does not go far in clearing up the difficulty with which we are here concerned, and is not free from ambiguity. Wordsworth is, no doubt, careful to talk consistently of *language*, using it in all probability in the narrower sense of *words* or *vocabulary* to the exclusion of *order* and *arrangement*. All that he means to imply, then, is that occasions are not rare in which the *words* of ordinary prose are quite equal to producing the loftiest poetic effects, and are quite in their place even in the most inspired parts of poetry. This is a valuable truth—and not exactly a truism, as maintained by Coleridge—a truth that ran the risk of being ignored in the contemporary practice of poetry, and which, therefore, stood in need of reaffirmation, even if the statement is confined to a question of vocabulary only. Moreover, the statement in its present form, and confined merely to an assertion of occasional identity between the *words* of prose and those of poetry, is perfectly unexceptionable: a reference to the actual facts of poetry will prove it beyond doubt.



It is only when a universal proposition is sought to be erected on the basis of this undoubted fact, and the identity extended to all cases (as has been done in the following statement), that a flaw both in logic as also in respect of critical soundness creeps into the argument and makes the theory too palpably one-sided and unbalanced. Thus it is in the transition to the generalization (there neither is, nor can be, an essential difference between the language of prose and that of metrical composition) that we reach the weakest point in the enunciation of Wordsworth's theory. To say that some *words* are equally in their place in both prose and poetry is one thing; to assert that there cannot be any conceivable difference between the two in respect of *words* is an entirely different thing—a statement absolutely unwarranted, as will be seen, by actual facts in poetry.

Here, again, let us try to find out whether the statement refers to *words* only or *words and arrangement* both. As was already anticipated, the statement can also be so interpreted as to take language in the wider sense of *order* as well; there is nothing in the actual words used by Wordsworth to invalidate such an interpretation. He might as well be taken to mean that there are some occasions when the highest poetic effects are attained by a strict conformity to the words and order of prose. And as we shall see later on, in some of the best poems of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the "prose choice" is also supplemented by the prose order, though this latter is not followed with a meticulous exactitude but with such slight deviations as are necessitated by conditions of rhyme and metre without disturbing the natural flow and sequence of ideas. The only reason that inclines in favour of the narrower interpretation is, as we shall see, the incomparably greater difficulty experienced by the poet in the observance of *prose order*, along with the words of prose, in poetry.



(c) It is only when we pass on to the sweeping generalization that "there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and that of metrical composition", that we feel the full measure of the untenability of the wider interpretation from the standpoint of critical soundness. If such an assertion of universal identity squares but little with facts in the case of *words* only, it betrays a still more hopeless cleavage with the actual practice of poets if taken to include *order* also. This aspect of the question will be considered more fully under (4).

There is something, however, in the second statement of Wordsworth which goes to show that all this talk, about identity between prose and poetry in respect of *words* or *order* merely scrapes the surface of the real question of poetic style. There are expressions in this statement which reveal that thoughts about general style, as opposed to the mere choice or arrangement of words, have, for the first time, suggested themselves to the mind of the poet. The expressions "*good prose*" and "*prose when prose is well written*" serve to open up the wider issues which Wordsworth and his apologists are at so much pains to shut out of view. It is here that for the first time Wordsworth shows the consciousness that the discussion as to the relation between the language of prose and poetry cannot be carried on in terms of *word* or even *arrangement* only : that, in affirming identity in respect to *words* and *order*, he is really leaving the most vital element untouched. Thus even though we agree for the sake of argument that Wordsworth is perfectly right in maintaining that the same words or order are applicable to prose and poetry alike, this does not get prose nearer to poetry, until the more vital question of style are transmitted along with them. Indeed the recognition of this more vital element of style as a factor in poetry tends to reveal the utter inadequacy of the basis on which Wordsworth promulgates his theory of



poetic diction—the mere adoption of the homely words of prose or prose order on the part of poetry does not avail to solve the real problem of poetic style, although it goes some way in scraping off its surface incrustations and straightening out some of its superfluous tortuosities. The real problem for poetic style is to retain its heightened quality of expressiveness, and the admissibility of prose words and order in poetry is to be judged solely by reference to this standard, so that any theory which lays down that the prose order and words are to be followed in poetry irrespective of its effect upon the general quality and level of style is hopelessly wide of the mark ; and the adequacy of such a theory is to be judged, not so much on abstract grounds, as upon a close scrutiny of its practical effects, of the extent to which it is capable of meeting the highest demands of the poetic art. We shall accordingly now turn to the practice of contemporary poets, and to the critical soundness of either position, in order to strengthen and confirm, the results of our discussion on the present head, which, as we have seen, tend to incline slightly in favour of the narrower interpretation of “language” in the sense of “words” merely.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY CONDITIONS OF POETRY AND CRITICISM

The first remark of Wordsworth, discussed at length under the previous head, requires, as has been seen, for its final interpretation a discussion of the real attitude of contemporary critics towards the question of poetic diction. The position can be considered from two different standpoints : (i) whether the attitude of the critics was really such as Wordsworth represents it to be—whether in fact there was such a rooted antipathy against not merely prose *words* but prose *order* also in poetry among the critics of the time, and (ii) what was Words-



worth's own object in attributing such a view to contemporary critics of poetry. Such a discussion is expected to take us at least a step nearer towards getting Wordsworth's real meaning.

(i) The question, therefore, is : does Wordsworth accurately represent the attitude of the critics? It is really a matter for surprise as to why the critics or readers of poetry should disapprove of a single line or even a series of lines in a poem, which was identical with prose in the matter of its *language* and *the order of the words* when this was quite compatible with the needs of metre and logic, unless we imagine them as so inveterately enamoured of the gaudy splendour of the so-called "poetic diction " as to look upon every simple and homely word as a thing suspect. They must also be supposed to have such a morbid suspicion of everything pertaining to prose as to banish an approximation to prose order altogether from the sphere of poetry, even when this constituted the most natural and effective arrangement of the words that could be conceived. It is difficult to believe that the perversity of contemporary taste would go so far as to condemn in poetry a mere correspondence with prose *language* and *order*, if all the other conditions were complied with, and when this was done without any detriment to the distinctive poetic graces.

One can conceive of this extravagant and rooted distrust with respect to the *words*, but can hardly think of extending it to the prose order as well, and it will be very difficult to trace this antagonism to prose order either in the opinions of the critics or in the practice of the poets of the age. This antagonism to prose *words* and *order* seems specially unlikely in the case of a generation whose taste had been formed on the poetry of Dryden and Pope, poetry in which correspondence with prose, in *words*, and more so in respect of *order*, was carried to the furthest possible limit. The use of a gaudy poetic diction and flagrant inversions of prose order are rather the characteristics of the group of lyrical



poets, headed by Gray and Collins, whose new-born lyrical enthusiasm had not yet found its appropriate channel of flow and instrument of expression, and was very often, leading them to play strange tricks both with language and its arrangement. Gray and Collins were by no means popular, or at any rate influential, among their contemporaries, and so it does not seem very likely that their poetry should have laid down the law to the critics of the age, and inspired critical canons which governed the practice of other poets.

Let us turn to a much more typical and influential figure, that of Dr. Johnson, who was a loyal follower of the Pope tradition, and whose name is popularly associated with that vicious poetic diction which provoked the ire of Wordsworth. The grounds of such an association, however, appear not quite unassailable, if we strictly interpret the meaning of the phrase "poetic diction". Dr. Johnson, no doubt, had a weakness for bombastic Latinisms and polysyllabic words, a rather decided leaning for speech of the "whale" variety, specially when he shut his tongue and took up the pen ; but he was as intolerant as Wordsworth himself of real poetic diction, of that faded and meretricious splendour in language which was based upon a wrong use of second-hand imagery, of figures and flowers of speech borrowed from the worn-out classical myths. And his criticism also went the way of his poetic practice. Some of his most withering sneers are directed against the "false splendour" of Gray's style, and he speaks with equal emphasis, though in a kindlier vein, against the luxuriance of imagination in Collins, which is the real source of his extravagance in language. He was quite capable of such lines as the following (quoted by Wordsworth in his Appendix of 1802, Smith, p. 44):

How long shall sloth usurp thy useless hours,  
Unnerve thy vigour, and enchain thy powers ?

—which he meant as a poetic version of the homely



words, "How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?" (Proverbs vi). But we cannot imagine him capable of the line in Gray's Sonnet quoted by Wordsworth as an instance of the false poetic diction against which he had taken up arms—"And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire" (Smith, p. 20).

As a matter of fact, if we analyse Dr. Johnson's style, we shall find that it is marked more by a desire for logical elaboration and rhetorical emphasis than by a tendency towards misplaced ornament or tawdry splendour. Johnson had little of the imaginative element in him, and his self-imposed role of a moral censor of the age inclined him to the use of logical and rhetorical methods in his poems, while his sturdy commonsense temperament made him impatient of anything like vagueness or suggestiveness in poetry. And, whatever might be charged against Johnson as far as his choice of words is concerned, he remained substantially loyal to the Augustan tradition in respect of maintaining prose order in his poems. It was not so much to Johnson as to Gray, who sinned both against *choice* and *ordering* of words, that the full force of the criticism of Wordsworth is applicable, though Wordsworth is evidently wrong in thinking that the age was in sympathy with Gray or shared his proneness towards inversions of the prose order. Thus Johnson, too, does not furnish any example in support of that aversion to prose order which forms the subject of Wordsworth's indictment against the age as a whole.

Curiously enough, just on the eve of the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the vices of Gray and Johnson in the matter of vocabulary combined together were embodied in the poems of Erasmus Darwin, the poet of the *Botanic Garden*. To a love for Latinisms and polysyllabic words, inherited direct from Pope's *Translation of Homer*, traceable in the last resort to the example of Milton and fortified by the example of his great fellow-townsmen, Dr. Johnson, he added a curiously false sense of the picturesque



and an entirely perverted attempt to clothe scientific facts and ideas in what must be called a travesty of imaginative form. Some of the worst and most intolerable defects of the vicious poetic diction against which Wordsworth launched his campaign were thus exemplified in the poetry of Darwin, which was all the more repelling on account of the thin imaginative veneer spread over it. In order to understand exactly what Wordsworth had in view in affirming identity of language between poetry and prose, we must take account of this contemporary craze for the vicious diction of the *Botanic Garden*, which was acclaimed as the highest perfection of poetic style. This style, which we now recognize as vicious and perverted, did not however offend so much against *prose order* as against the *prose choice* of words.

From this discussion of the style of eighteenth-century poetry it follows that there were three sources of corruption to be distinguished in contemporary poetic style: (1) the influence of Gray and Collins, which was responsible for both a tawdry splendour in the words as also for inversions of the natural order in their arrangement; (2) the influence of Johnson, who introduced a preference for bombastic Latinized words, but was free from both imaginative extravagance and violation of the prose order; and (3) the influence of Erasmus Darwin, who, in his choice of words, combined the defects of both Gray and Johnson, but remained substantially faithful to the prose order in his heroic couplets. The taste of contemporary critics was formed more on the model of Johnson and Darwin than on that of Gray, who remained a more or less neglected or discredited force till the definite triumph of the Romantic Movement, which was yet a long way off. Hence it seems far more likely that if contemporary critics would demur to a parallelism between poetry and prose, it would be more on the ground of the *words* than on that of *order* or *arrangement*; for with the exception of Gray and Collins, all the other leading poets.



and critics of the age, who might be supposed influential in the formation of the popular taste, both preached and practised a conformity to prose order in their poetry. Thus the difficulty of finding in contemporary poetry a parallel to the state of things described by Wordsworth is a strong reason for thinking that "language" in the sentence under discussion is confined in its meaning to *words* merely and does not include their *order* as well.

As against this, it may be urged that in order to establish a line in poetry as prosaic and rouse the hostility of readers and critics against it, not merely the *words* of *prose*, but a *conformity to prose order* is indispensable : so that though they had no objection to prose order by itself in a line of poetry, yet they must have insisted on its presence as a confirmatory evidence in company with homely words of everyday use, before the prosaic character of the line could be brought home to them and before they could damn it as such. The prose *choice* of words must have aroused their suspicions ; but the prose order must have been necessary to ripen them into certainty. Thus though a reference to contemporary usage supports the narrower interpretation, yet we feel that the wider one cannot be ruled out quite unceremoniously.

(ii) Turning next to Wordsworth's own intention, it may be urged that in attributing such an extreme antipathy to prose to critics of the age, he had a purpose of his own, which may well hold good, even though it may be proved that he misrepresented their attitude and opinion. Wordsworth's own object must have been to draw attention to the extreme and unwarrantable suspicion against the introduction into poetry of anything pertaining to prose, prevalent among the poets and critics of the age, with a view to maintaining that there is greater room for prose structure, including words and order, in poetry than they were prepared to allow. It may be quite true that Wordsworth might have exagger-



ted the perversity of the critics and imagined an antagonism on their part to prose order, when no such antagonism really existed ; but this does not absolutely disprove the possibility that the ideal which he himself wanted to inculcate related to a conformity to prose order on the part of poetry, though here he was less an advocate of a revolutionary change and more in accordance with orthodox usage than he was aware of. Such an idea is strengthened when we remember that in the best poems of Wordsworth in the *Lyrical Ballads*, the prose words and order generally go together, that the use of the simple words generally entails a substantial, though not a meticulously exact, compliance with the simple structure of prose, and also that the most dismal examples of failure are furnished by those poems in which we come across the naked, bald words of prose, which are neither heightened in respect of expressive power nor arranged with a view to attaining conversational force and directness.

However, it is possible to carry speculation too far on a point like this ; Wordsworth was undoubtedly impelled to enunciate his ideas of reform by abuses in the contemporary practice of poetry, and these abuses certainly referred more to diction than arrangement. We might justly infer from this that Wordsworth's ideas of reform did not stretch beyond the limits of *words* only. On the contrary, it would not be very far-fetched to imagine that he also wanted to include a *conformity to prose order* within the scope of his reforming activity, as he must have been conscious that a mere reform of vocabulary would not strike at the root of the evil and as in his own poems he strove—with very moderate success, no doubt—to recapture the conversational language of rustics, in which adherence to prose order was at least as vital an element as the selection of simple words. The question as to his exact meaning can only be finally laid at rest when his actual practice in the *Lyrical Ballads* will be examined in order to find out whether it



is governed by a desire for homely words only, or for a conformity to prose order as well. In the meantime it seems reasonable to conclude that Wordsworth's theory was in the main directed against the wrong choice of words ; and as an additional element of deterioration was contributed by the inversions of prose order brought on by the rebirth of imaginative enthusiasm, and as Gray figures rather prominently in Wordsworth's strictures on poetic diction, it can be likewise held that he must have intended a hit against this factor also, if only as a secondary object.

Thus it follows that Wordsworth has made a rather unfair statement of the case against the critics, whichever of the two interpretations we may come to adopt. He altogether ignores that the critics might have very strong reasons to justify their rejection of prose order and homely words. This oversight is all the more deplorable as it drives him to the opposite kind of excess in his own poetry, in utter disregard of the just claims of a heightened and imaginative poetic style. Nor can we imagine any critic in his senses, however vicious his general taste might have been, as likely to object to a single line in poetry for its mere correspondence with prose. The objections against Wordsworth's own poems are not certainly of this nature, for in them he does by no means confine himself to single lines or even a series of lines in his adoption of prose words : he conceives the ambition of writing throughout in the language of prose, between which and the language of poetry he can discover no essential difference. One is thus tempted to fancy that Wordsworth is here imagining an extreme state of things in order to justify his own excessive introduction of prosaisms in his new poems : he seems to make use of the position as a sort of jumping ground whence to launch off into his own excesses, both in respect of theory and practice.



#### 4. CRITICAL SOUNDNESS OF EITHER POSITION

Let us then estimate the critical soundness of the position created by the acceptance of both the wider and narrower connotations of the term "language". It has already been seen that from the standpoint of practicability, the wider sense presents difficulties that are wellnigh insuperable, and so the narrower sense proves more acceptable. The use of simple and homely words in a few lines of poetry, without any detriment to poetic effect, is not a very exacting condition to fulfil; but the handicap is considerably increased if we expect the poet to conform to prose order as well. Every poet worth the name must needs fret and foam if his choice were exclusively and rigorously restricted to prose words on all occasions; he would throw up his vocation in sheer disgust were he also commanded to conform to prose order in addition. We all feel that there is a difference—it may be *essential* or otherwise—between the words of poetry and those of prose; nevertheless we are reconciled to the assertion of Wordsworth with respect to identity in *words* on the ground that in the practice of eighteenth-century poets it was the difference that was over-emphasized, and that the assertion in question therefore represented a wholesome return to a neglected aspect of the truth.

But if this assertion of identity is taken to include *prose order* also, then we instinctively feel that we are led up to a hopeless position. Poetry may often be content with the homely words of prose and derive its most potent and magical effects out of them; it may not therefore regret so keenly the curtailment of its freedom in respect of choice of words, since sufficient resources are still left at its disposal. But it can hardly survive the additional restriction about conformity to prose order, if this is laid down as a permanent and inviolable condition for its observance. Wordsworth can hardly have been so much blinded by his theory as to have failed to foresee the natural consequences of such a rigorous restriction. And hence we must conclude that



Wordsworth could not have seriously advanced such an untenable proposition, striking at the very roots of metrical and rhymed poetry, as a universal truth, notwithstanding the assumption of Coleridge that such must have been his intention.

The real point at issue between Wordsworth and his opponents is the determination of the question as to whether the adoption of prose *order* and *words* in poetry would or would not lead to a lowering of the poetic level, whether these can be introduced in poetry without a sacrifice of the special poetic graces and effects. When Wordsworth proceeds to affirm essential identity between the language of prose and that of poetry as a universal truth, he must have done so on the tacit understanding that this identity would not involve any surrender of the grace and expressiveness of poetic style as a whole. The crux of the problem, therefore, lies in the inquiry as to how far Wordsworth was justified in this faith of his that poetry would not suffer by this alliance. A reference to the best poetry of Wordsworth and his contemporaries would serve to define the limits under which his theory is really acceptable, and the extent up to which the highest poetic effects are capable of being attained under the conditions laid down by him. Let us now proceed to carry on the inquiry with respect to (i) prose order and (ii) prose choice of words.

(i) How far, then, can *prose order* be adopted in poetry without any detriment to effective arrangement and metrical harmony, even if we leave aside the question of the subtler and more intangible graces which lie beyond the scope of arrangement?

If we understand him as using "language" in the wider sense, then he may be taken to imply that the prose order can be adopted in poetry without any detriment to effective arrangement and metrical harmony. There is, to be sure, a class of ideas in poetry which run naturally into the mould of prose ; their most effective expression



lies in a strict conformity to the directness of prose order. The poetry of Dryden and Pope, the leaders of the classical school, especially their satiric and didactic poetry, is full of passages whose effectiveness and telling quality depend upon this conformity to prose. Any inversion of the prose order would have taken the sting out of them, and blunted their edge, and weakened them beyond measure. These lines also had the merit of satisfying the laws of metre, though, of course, the metrical artistry in them was not of a specially high and fine quality, and consisted rather in a mechanical repetition of, or ringing changes upon, a very simple formula. It would be hazardous to hold—as an examination of Wordsworth's own practice in the *Lyrical Ballads*, based on his determination to use *throughout* the actual language of rustic conversation, would lead one to suppose that he does—that a conformity to prose order would in every case be quite compatible with meeting the subtler and rarer demands of metre and rhythm.

In fact, it is the more obvious sort of thoughts, generally of a reflective and argumentative turn, that run naturally into the mould of prose, and can dispense with all metrical inversions without losing anything of their rhythmic quality. Nobody can claim perfection for the poetry of Dryden and Pope, either with respect to passion and imagination or metrical artistry; they have a sort of second-rate excellence and a kind of mechanical flawlessness, a metallic polish and glitter rather than a really fine sense of harmony on their metrical side. But we can at once see that subtler rhythmic effects would call for a more cunning and calculated marshalling of the words infinitely beyond the rough-and-ready methods of prose. It is only the highest imaginative inspiration, working upon the most intense feelings, that can at rare moments combine the direct simplicity of prose with the finest effects of rhythm and the deepest call of passion. Such, for example, are the classical lines of Wordsworth himself in his *Lucy Poems* :



A slumber did my spirit seal ;  
I had no human fears.  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years—

where the more formal artistic graces of poetry are swallowed up in the transcendent simplicity, the naked, poignant sincerity of a long-repressed cry of sorrow. But these are the record and the imprint of exceptional moods of passion and moments of inspiration ; the simplicity is achieved by a superb effort which cannot be prolonged.

To a somewhat lower level, which, however, still represents a respectable height, belong some other poems of Wordsworth in the *Lyrical Ballads*, in which a conformity to prose order has been attained consistently with a depth of sentiment and the needs of metre. In such a passage as this from *To my Sister* :

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach us more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good  
Than all the sages can,

we come across a very happy instance of the adoption in poetry of the strict order of words in prose, where the thought is not merely satirical or argumentative as in Dryden and Pope, but is touched with a deeper vein of sentiment and reflection, and the needs of metre, though not very exacting, have been quite adequately satisfied.

But, after all, it is only with respect to a small and limited class of poems that the adoption of the prose order of words can be recommended as a safe and legitimate device. For the vast majority of poems, a departure from prose order is an absolute necessity, even though the "prose choice" can be substantially adhered to. On the one hand, there are mightier and more thrilling harmonies, paeans of joy and wails of sorrow, which in their embodiment in words break through the narrow barriers of prose and carve out a new channel for their



expression, a quite unprecedented combination and movement of words. Can we conceive of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* or Keats's *Ode to the Nightingale* as covered by the scope of Wordsworth's formula? Nor is such a conformity any more imaginable in the case of his own *Immortality Ode* and *Ode to Duty*. At the other extreme stand quite a host of poems which just manage to raise their heads above the level of prose, and cling tenaciously to rhyme and metre and the inversions naturally consequent thereupon as the last refuge against a downright lapse into prosaicism. They may follow prose, so far as the choice of words is concerned; but they must stop short somewhere, if they are to retain their separate individuality as poetry and not allow themselves to be merged into prose; and it is here that they are forced to take their final stand. The disastrous effects of neglecting these last precautions are exemplified in these lines of *The Brothers* which Coleridge quotes in his *Biographia Literaria*:

The loiterer, not unnoticed by his comrades,  
Lay stretched at ease; but, passing by the place  
On their return, they found that he was gone.  
No ill was feared; till one of them by chance  
Entering, when evening was far spent, the house  
Which at that time was James's home, there learned  
That nobody had seen him all that day.

Thus it is extremely unsafe to lay down as a general rule that poetry should throughout maintain the order of prose, and conversational prose, since experience and the actual practice of poets go to show that this cannot be done in most cases without spoiling effective arrangement and metrical harmony.

We thus come to the conclusion that the affirmation of an identity between the *language* of prose and that of poetry is true only with respect to a very limited class of poems, if "language" is taken in the wider sense. As such an assertion but ill accords with actual facts in the sphere



of poetry, we are forced to admit that the case for the wider interpretation is considerably weakened, and to fall back upon the narrower sense as the more plausible of the two alternative views, though this too, as we shall see, is not without its flaws and drawbacks.

(ii) Taking up, then, the narrower sense in which "language" is used to mean words only, our first task is to sift the tacit assumption of Wordsworth in the enunciation of his theory that every homely word of prose is quite fitted to carry on the high functions of poetry. Wordsworth might not have made an explicit statement to this effect ; but it is quite certain that this idea is at the back of his mind when from a perfectly reasonable assertion of an occasional identity he jumps to the unwarranted generalization about absolute identity between the two on all occasions. This assumption is further strengthened by his own unsuspecting use of the homeliest words in some of his poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, in full confidence that his poetry is none the worse for them, as well as his unwillingness to admit in theory that the failure of any one poem, whether of himself or of others, is due to the employment of flat and prosaic words only. Thus he offers a curious defence of a stanza in Cowper's *Alexander Selkirk*, which is written in simple, homely language, and which, as he is forced to admit, is rather tame and common-place in its total effect (Smith, *Wordsworth's Prose Works*, pp. 45-46).

With a view to exonerating the *words* used, he transfers the entire blame for the feebleness of effect to the triviality of the ideas and sentiments in the passage ; and urges that the same words would have proved equally bad in prose, so that they are scarcely any worse in verse. On the disconcerting question as to why the poet did not feel any qualms of artistic conscience in introducing such naked, bald words, tame and halting enough even in prose, into the higher sphere of verse, and as to whether the assertion of an identity of language between prose



and verse is not calculated to blunt still further the fine edge of artistic perceptions in this respect, Wordsworth maintains a prudent silence. The lapses and malpractices in the matter of language in his own poems go to show how far his own powers of discrimination were impaired by obsession with his theory.

Then in his remarks upon the next stanza of Cowper's poem, beginning with "Ye winds that have made me your sport," he triumphantly points out how a very high poetic effect has been attained out of the simplest, mostly monosyllabic words, and is thus confirmed in his theory that prosaic words are quite adequate for the highest purposes of poetry. Apparently he found it impossible to reconcile these two divergent instances : in the one case, homely words produce a flat and feeble effect, and Wordsworth can only shield them by shifting on the blame to the triviality of the sentiment ; in the other case, where they achieve a degree of success commensurate with the needs of poetry, Wordsworth tends to make light of the emotional depth and fervour that heighten the expressiveness of the simple words, and is apt to claim the whole credit on their behalf. He fails to draw the right conclusion from these two contrasted cases; he does not see, as he ought to have done if he had not been obsessed by his theory, that mere words are not enough ; that the point of real importance is how far the words have been caught up into a really effective style ; and that an unqualified faith in the efficacy of simple words without a guarantee of their having been knit up into a compact and expressive style is bound to lead to disaster. Words in themselves play but a minor part in determining the quality and level of writing ; they are, in fact, but pawns on the counter, a weak and disorderly rabble in the hands of an ordinary writer, but marshalled into a close-knit and glittering array by the imagination of a master-author, they march with a resistless power of which they gave but little promise when standing alone. Wordsworth



thus, in his ruthless campaign against "poetic diction" as the source of all evils in the poetic world, was unconsciously and in theory, if not always in practice, giving to *words* a degree of undeserved importance. Indeed, the failure to estimate the complex question of style at its proper valuation, and the consequent tendency to attach an extravagant importance to its component elements, is the great defect in Wordsworth's theory and is responsible for his most serious lapses in practice.

Thus we see that though there are many words which are equally well in their place, whether used in prose or poetry, yet it does not follow that every commonplace word is suitable for poetic purposes on every occasion. No doubt Wordsworth's theory supplemented by his practice, goes to increase considerably the proportion of homely words that can be quite properly admitted into the service of poetry; but even Wordsworth has not succeeded in lifting every word he has used into the higher sphere of poetry, and many of his failures are undoubtedly due to this wrong choice of words which are found to be too dull and flat. Even taking it for granted that they would be found equally flat and inexpressive in prose, it is undeniable that their weakness is more thoroughly exposed because of their being yoked to the winged car of Poesy. It is quite true that no stigma attaches to the words themselves; for it can be quite easily shown that the identical words which strike us as low and uninspired in one context are invested with a rare beauty and expressiveness in a different setting, where they seem to be marshalled to an altogether higher tune and breathed upon by a loftier imaginative power. But the fact cannot be gainsaid that on many occasions Wordsworth has suffered on account of his injudicious choice of words, words which are bad relatively to the particular context, if not absolutely—and has thus given a fair opportunity to the critics to harbour a suspicion



against the homely words which bear a very large portion of the responsibility for the poet's failure.

The only occasion where Wordsworth shows a consciousness of the importance of style as a whole in his enunciation of the theory of poetic vocabulary is in his statement that sometimes good prose and good poetry use alike the same words. But here also he gains in respect of critical soundness only at the expense of his favourite theory.

Obviously, here "*good and well-written prose*" raises a question of style, of the total impression produced, and not merely of the individual words used—introducing, moreover, an element of vagueness and obscurity in his theory that detracts greatly from its abstract philosophical value, and shakes our faith in the efficacy of the simple words. For it is a question of speculation as to what Wordsworth precisely means by "*good and well-written prose*". Does he imply the presence of poetic qualities in the prose or a certain dignity of tone and elevation of subject-matter, or a compact and heightened quality of expression—elements that all go to contribute to the effectiveness of style? Good poetry may not in some cases differ in its *words* from good or well-written prose ; but this may be due to the presence of qualities which are shared in common by both of them, qualities which come equally home to, and sit with an equal degree of becomingness on, both these methods of expression, and are not inherent in the words used. Moreover, to say that *good* poetry does not *sometimes* differ from *good* prose is not to establish a general identity of language between them, as Wordsworth seeks to do in the next instance; for the soundness of a theory is to be tested by its application to normal cases, to cases stripped of all exceptional features, and reduced to their lowest terms, as it were. For one bent upon proving that words used in prose are quite in their place in poetry also, and do not involve the lowering of the poetic quality, it is not enough to show



that *good* prose and *good* poetry *sometimes* use alike the same words, to confine his observation to good specimens only of either species : for the real credit of maintaining the level intact will belong to that subtle combination of factors which make up "goodness" of style, and not to mere community of words.

Then again, a theory must be held responsible for the perversions and excesses to which it naturally leads, and a frequent liability to such lapses tends to throw considerable doubt on its soundness; that theory must be unsound which, in its ordinary workings, does not save from perversions in practice. Judged by this test also, Wordsworth's theory is found to falter. However cautiously, in his enunciation of it, might he try to confine his assertion as to community of words to the case of good prose and poetry, in practice he feels tempted to act upon it more absolutely. When, as in *Simon Lee*, or in the lower flats of *The Thorn* and *The Brothers*, the poet seeks to transplant the bare, naked words of prose to the sphere of poetry, without that imaginative heightening which is their main prop and support in every good writing, whether prose or verse, the hollowness of his theory stands unmasked. It then becomes apparent that words play but a minor part in determining the quality and level of writing. The defence set up by some recent critics that the passages cited from *Simon Lee* do not really disprove Wordsworth's theory, as the language adopted in the poem is that of bad prose, is hardly convincing, as it was the bias imparted by this theory that made the poet insensible to the distinction between good and bad prose, and made him try the rash experiment of using the bare, unraised language of the most trivial kind of prose in the sphere of poetry. As was remarked already, a theory must be held responsible for the excesses to which it leads ; and Wordsworth has none but himself to blame if he exceeded the strict limits of his theory, and went down to the language of *bad* prose for his model.



All these considerations make it clear that it is only within very narrow limits that the truth of Wordsworth's theory about the identity between the language of prose and that of poetry is tenable even when "language" is taken in the sense of *words* only. In the first place, it is the language of good prose, and not all prose, that can be *sometimes* used in poetry without any appreciable lowering of level. In the second place, it is the "goodness" of the style, whatever that may be, that makes the words in it fit for the language of poetry, and not the words taken by themselves. In the third place, Wordsworth's theory tempts him, not rarely, to use the words of bad prose in his poetry, with almost fatal results. We may not agree to go to the opposite extreme with Coleridge and hold that the very form of verse entails the use of a language different from that of prose—"I write in metre because I am about to use a language different from that of prose". Many of Wordsworth's own best poems go to show that the simplest words of prose are quite suited to the ends of poetry, provided there is a genuine imaginative power behind their use. Nevertheless, the fact is undeniable that the very form of poetry presupposes a mood of abnormal excitement, prepares the mind for a more high-wrought and sustained form of expression, and justifies a more daring and even audacious use of language than would hardly be warranted in the case of any but the most poetic, imaginative sort of prose.

Moreover, the very form in which the theory is put forward is another proof of its inadequacy ; to establish Wordsworth's proposition it will not do merely to show that there are some cases in which the language of prose and poetry is interchangeable ; it must also be proved, as Coleridge acutely remarks, that there are no *words* in poetry which cannot be traced equally in prose, that there is not a single instance of incompatibility between "the prose choice" of words and those that obtain in poetry. This would be a very bold assertion, indeed, notwithstanding the fact that the nineteenth century has done much to break down the barriers between



prose and verse, and the impassioned language and even the rhythmic quality of poetry have tended to be more and more absorbed by such poetic prose as that of De Quincey, Carlyle, and Ruskin.

Wordsworth indeed approaches prose from the very opposite pole, and with an object entirely different from that with which these masters of prose approach poetry: while the latter seek to engraft the subtler beauties of poetry on prose, Wordsworth has taken upon himself the far more difficult task of demonstrating the fitness of the homely, everyday words of prose for the highest ends of poetry. Both these kinds of efforts are directed by one common purpose : to bring home the kinship between prose and poetry, and bridge the gulf which in popular and traditional conception is supposed to roll between them. And it is true beyond doubt that the result of their efforts has been to discover many unsuspected points of kinship and agreement between the two rival instruments of expression. But even then it would be going too far to suggest that correspondence and community have been established all along the line ; that the inmost secret of verse has been captured in prose, or that the barest words of prose are invariably successful in scaling the heights of poetry. Each type of art retains its individuality, notwithstanding the discovery of numerous points of contact between them. Thus we are forced to conclude that Wordsworth's assertions, however valuable as revealing a little-noticed element in the language of poetry, can hardly claim to rank as the adequate promulgation of a new theory on the subject.

##### 5. ANALYSIS OF THE SONNET OF GRAY

If the passages hitherto analysed and discussed do not lead to the conclusive settlement of the vexed question as to whether Wordsworth was referring to the *words* merely, or the *order of the words*, his criticisms on the Sonnet to Gray ought to be more helpful in settling the point, as



an application of the theory should clear up all that is vague or obscure in its enunciation. A casual glance at the lines in it selected for approbation tends to show that Wordsworth perhaps did not mean to include *order* within the scope of "language" and to insist upon a strict conformity to prose order on the part of verse as an indispensable condition of his praise. No poet worth the name could think of bartering away his time-honoured charters and privileges for the sake of a theory, whatever may be the extent of its importance in his eyes. Indeed, two of the lines selected for approval in Gray's Sonnet, e.g. "A different object do these eyes require" and "In my breast the imperfect joys expire", which are marked by a slight departure from prose order, as well as countless instances from his own *Lyrical Ballads*, show that Wordsworth did not make a fetish of this strict conformity to prose order, as no poet burdened with the fetters of metre and rhyme can ever afford to do.

It is interesting to scrutinize the lines which Wordsworth has favoured with his praise, not merely with a view to the clearing up of the obscurities in his theory, but on more general grounds as well, for the purpose of forming an idea as to the soundness of his critical judgment. Wordsworth has advanced no reasons for his distribution of praise and blame, and Coleridge, except in the case of a very few lines, has been almost equally curt and uncommunicative in the mention of his disagreement with Wordsworth, merely condemning his friend's choice as arbitrary, but refraining like him from the statement of any grounds. On going through the lines in the Sonnet, it appears that Wordsworth has not been particularly happy in his choice of what he thought to be "good" lines : in his eagerness to base this praise on a strict conformity to his theory, he has been singularly blind to the more vital question of imaginative and emotional level. For example, the two lines already quoted, "*A different object do these eyes require*" and "*In my breast the imper-*



*fect joys expire*", have a certain lame and halting gait which is poles asunder from the winged motion and harmony of poetry. As for the other three selected lines, they have the merit of a direct and straightforward expression of feeling, no doubt, but their sincerity is their principal and perhaps only recommendation. In respect of one of these lines, "I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear", Wordsworth apologizes for the use of the word "fruitless" in place of the ordinary, prosaic form "fruitlessly", which he recognizes to be a defect—this constituting another proof that it was the *words* after all which Wordsworth had mainly in view in the enunciation of his theory.

It is even more interesting to trace the grounds of his disapprobation of the remaining lines. There are a few lines which are obviously bad on the very face of them, and disfigured by the presence of that "vicious poetic diction" which Wordsworth is at so much pains to condemn. "And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire"—a line like this has the hollow unreality, the empty gaudiness which gave to so great a portion of contemporary poetry the likeness of an overblown bubble. Certain other lines, though not so completely bad as the one just quoted, are spoiled by the occurrence of ready-made, conventional phrases which tend to chill the warmth of feeling—"amorous descant" (L. 3), "the busy race" (L. 9), "wanton tribute" (L. 11). With respect to the rest, it is a little difficult to guess the exact grounds of the poet's disapproval—possibly his judgment is warped by a rather morbid suspicion of everything having the least approach to a personification or the attribution of life and feeling to the inanimate objects of Nature. This inference becomes easier, if we refer to Wordsworth's criticism of two stanzas in Cowper's *Alexander Selkirk*, where he is more explicit in the statement of the grounds of his praise and blame.

(Appendix to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802—N. C. Smith—*Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, pp. 45-46).



Religion ! what treasure untold  
Resides in that heavenly word  
More precious than silver and gold,  
Or all that this earth can afford.

Wordsworth speaks of these lines as "poorly expressed" ; he adds : "Some critics would call the language prosaic ; the fact is it would be bad prose, so bad, that it is scarcely worse in metre". It is a pity that such a fine power of discrimination did not stand him in any good stead in his own poetry, and could not save him from lapse into the worst kind of prose. Cowper, at any rate, dwells upon a tame and commonplace sentiment ; Wordsworth in his *Simon Lee* and other poems dwells on still more trivial facts and details. Then in the next four lines—

But the sound of the Church-going bell,  
Those valleys and rocks never heard,  
Ne'er sighed at the sound of a knell,  
Or smiled when a sabbath appeared—

Wordsworth finds fault with the violent inappropriateness of the epithet "church-going", and remarks with respect to the last two lines—"The two lines 'Ne'er sighed,' etc'., are, in my opinion, an instance of the language of passion wrested from its proper use. . . . I should condemn the passage, though perhaps few readers will agree with me, as vicious poetic diction."

This seems to throw light on Wordsworth's condemnation of such apparently innocent and blameless lines as "In vain to me the *smiling mornings shine*" (L. 1), "Or *cheerful* fields resume their green attire" (L. 4), and "And *new-born* pleasure brings to happier men" (L. 10), in which the italicized words, conveying as they do a faint idea of personification, seem to constitute the source of offence. In the lines from Cowper's poem which Wordsworth takes exception to, it is certain that the process of personification has been carried too far, to the extent of imparting a violent jar and distortion to our feel-



ings. But Gray's lines are comparatively free from this vicious excess ; in them personification has not been carried beyond the legitimate ends of poetry and the habitual devices of poets ; and it undoubtedly betokens an over-much fastidiousness of taste and an undue deference to his theory to condemn these lines on a ground not much more serious than this, to convict them on so slight an offence. And in sheer poetic merit they do not fall short of the lines which have been approved and eulogized—the only difference being that they do not bear so directly upon feeling as do the latter, being concerned with description of nature that forms the background of the poet's personal feeling, and throws it into greater relief. Wordsworth's condemnation of these lines is, therefore, based upon a certain impatience of what may be called conventional nature—imagery used in poetry for accentuating the element of human feeling in it.

As for the remaining lines, "These ears, alas! for other notes repine" ( L. 5 ) and "To warm their little loves the birds complain" ( L. 12 ), the exact ground of their rejection by Wordsworth is a still more problematical question. The first line may have been pitched in a higher key of passion than was perhaps quite commendable to the austere tastes of the poet and the second line might perhaps have been discredited by the slightly conventional touch about the word "complain". At any rate, from a survey of the entire Sonnet it is perfectly clear that Wordsworth rigorously isolates such lines in it as directly embody the element of human feeling, and confines his praise to them, however plain or matter-of-fact their tone might otherwise be. All the remaining lines he throws open to condemnation partly on one ground and partly on another, but mainly because they represent the conventional background against which human emotion is placed in poetry, and as such have just a touch of the second-hand or insincere about them. Moreover, it is further clear that Wordsworth in his



theory tends to lay more stress on the words than on their order or arrangement, though in the best lines the two things generally go together.

But in this insisting on a mere identity of words without extending it to the order of the words, Wordsworth was preparing but another kind of trap for himself. Dealing with rustic life, and seeking to approximate his style to rustic speech, he was forced to draw upon a range of ideas which could be happily expressed only through a style of conversational directness, attained by a strict conformity to prose order; and any inversion of the regular order in such case had the effect of knocking the sense out of the line altogether, and tumbling the words into a hopeless confusion and awkward disarray. Wordsworth's theory was thus strained almost to the breaking-point by his unfortunate choice of subject matter, his unwise decision to illustrate the identity between the language of prose and verse by poems written in a style purporting to be a very close approximation to rustic speech. Thus his theory in his poems dealing with rustic life was not given a real chance of being tested on its own merits, but was saddled with a further handicap which imposed unduly severe restrictions on its proper working. While in his theory he maintained that the same *words* should be found equally good for both prose and poetry, and did not stipulate for a similarity with respect to *order*, in practice he was forced, by his injudicious choice of ground, to illustrate it in cases in which the preservation of the prose order was at least as important as keeping to the prose words; and no wonder that he fainted under this double burden.

Instances of such ignominious failure are by no means universal in the *Lyrical Ballads*. As has already been pointed out, a high level of success in keeping up both the prose choice and prose order of words has been attained in poems devoted to a half-serious exposition of the poet's peccoliar views about Nature. In poems like



*The Tables Turned, Expostulation and Reply, To My Sister*, etc., the undercurrent of a half-defined controversial purpose in the poet's mind lends a terseness and point to the ideas which tend naturally to cast themselves into the mould of prose. This epigrammatical terseness is carried to a higher pitch of perfection in *A Poet's Epitaph*, where the controversial and satiric purpose is more in evidence. An inspired simplicity is the mark of the *Lucy Poems*, whereas a strange and unwonted depth of feeling is imported into the apparently matter-of-fact narration in such poems as *Michael* and the best portions of *The Brothers*, in which the words as well as the order are marked by the closest approximation to those of prose. These will be taken up in connection with a more detailed study of the rustic poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*.

To sum up this rather long dissussion, Wordsworth's own words, we are forced to conclude, do not offer any conclusive settlement of the question as to whether in his assertion of identity between prose and poetry he was referring merely to *vocabulary*, or also to *order and arrangement*. There are sentences and words which are capable of either interpretation; and if at times we seem to be led forward definitely to one view, the very next moment the balance appears to incline to the opposite side, and we are left vacillating as before between the two. Which-ever view we may finally decide to accept, Wordsworth's position is not very sound on either supposition: he must have exaggerated the perversity of the critics of his generation, whether their objection be taken as confined to the *prose choice of words* only, or be extended to include *prose order*, and the critics, at any rate, could make up a fairly strong case for themselves, and justify their repugance as based on reasonable grounds. And the critics of the *Lyrical Ballads* in particular would have more than a fairly strong case to present on thier own behalf, for here their strictures have been provoked not



by a mere occasional conformity to prose, whether in *words* or *arrangement*, but by a much more exceptional attempt to use *throughout* the language of prose, and even the language of conversation among rustic people, in a long series of poems.

Wordsworth's own language in the Prefaces proving inconclusive, we have been driven to the sifting of other kinds of evidence in order to make our final choice between the two alternative views. And it is after long hesitation and wavering that we finally accept the view that Wordsworth must have confined his assertion of identity to the question of vocabulary merely : for (1) to insist on a correspondence to prose order on the part of poetry would be to lay down a wellnigh impossible condition, nor has such conformity been uniformly realized in the case of Wordsworth's own poetry ; (2) a reference to contemporary conditions goes to show that depravity in public taste did not go so far as to include condemnation of prose order also in poetry, but that on the contrary the best poetry of the eighteenth century was itself marked by a close adherence to the order of prose, even in the midst of the prevalence of the vicious poetic diction ; and (3) the remarks of Wordsworth on the Sonnet of Gray, both where he praises and where he condemns, force us on to the same conclusion, as conformity to prose order is not found to be a condition precedent to the winning of his approbation. The principal weakness of Wordsworth's position lies, as we have seen, in his separation of the *words* from the wider question of *style as a whole*, and in his tendency to think that a mere substitution of simple and homely words would by itself cure poetry of all its distempers and must inevitably lead on to rightness of style. Style, however, is found to be a much more subtle and elusive thing than Wordsworth took it to be, and escapes through the meshes of the ridiculously simple and elementary theorizings of the poet. It is in his failure to realize this complexity of style,



and the diversity of the means by which it is attained, that the most egregious mistakes of Wordsworth, both in his theory and practice, will be found to lie.



## VII *Interaction between metre and language*

WORDSWORTH next takes up the question of the identity of language between prose and poetry from yet another standpoint. Hitherto in his discussions on the subject he had taken it for granted that the metrical needs of the line were always fulfilled ; he had, in short, isolated the question of *language* from all the other factors with which it is, as a matter of fact, intertwined in poetry. He now faces the question a little more closely and discusses the nature of the interaction between language and metre. The question that he now asks is whether metre calls for a heightening of the language to be used in poetry, and whether the heightening is of so pronounced a kind as to upset the identity between the language of prose and that of poetry—whether, in short, metre justifies a “special poetic diction”.

In an earlier part of the Preface (Smith, pp. 12—13), Wordsworth asserts that he is going, in his *Lyrical Ballads*, to violate that unwritten yet formal engagement which poets are supposed to enter into with their readers by reason of the mere fact of writing in verse—viz. ;: that certain classes of *ideas* and *expressions* will be found in their books, and that others will be carefully excluded. Wordsworth then remarks that these expectations aroused in the mind of the reader by the use of metrical language must have varied from age to age so that it is difficult to fix a standard both with respect to the expectations of the reader and the duty of the poet to gratify these expectations. His plain implication is that in refusing to treat the reader to the high-flown, ornamental diction which has come to be associated with the contemporary practice of poetry, he is merely violating a fleeting fashion that tends to vary from age to age, and not a permanent and indispensable condition of the poetic craft. Since the style of poetry is more or less ornamental according to the tastes of different ages, it follows that the ornamental



element cannot be an indispensable feature of poetic style ; thus the poet is certainly within his rights in bringing the ornamental element in his poetry as low as possible, and the reader cannot urge immemorial usage and time-honoured practice against such an innovation on his part.

Wordsworth is unquestionably right in refusing to gratify unreasonable expectations on the part of the reader of a too glaring departure from ordinary language in poetry, inasmuch as these extravagant hopes were built up on the depraved taste of a particular age. But the question is, apart from the excesses and extravagances of particular ages, if there is any *permanent or irreducible minimum* in the heightening of language called for in poetry. If a poet is not prepared to meet this legitimate demand, he is not in a position to justify his use of metre. Of course, as between two extremes—that in which the heightening process is carried too far, so as to overlay and obscure the basis of reality, or where there is a sort of artificial heightening in language without a real quickening of the emotions, and that in which the exaltation is utterly discarded and the naked, bare language of prose is used, the poet boldly taking his stand on the unadorned dignity of the thought—the latter is certainly the manlier course to follow, because in it poverty of imagination is the soonest liable to be detected and exposed. Wordsworth, no doubt, followed this manlier extreme, but he might preferably have followed the golden mean, with undoubtedly better results for his poetry.

Wordsworth at last musters up courage to state explicitly the question which was all along present at the back of his mind, though the cavalier fashion in which he disposes of the objection seems to imply that he raises it rather to ease his conscience than to offer a satisfactory solution by probing it to the bottom. He makes a fair enough statement of the case against himself in setting forth the interaction between metre and language. "If



it be affirmed that rhyme and metrical arrangement of themselves constitute a distinction which overturns what has just been said on the strict affinity of metrical language with that of prose, and paves the way for other *artificial* distinctions which the mind voluntarily admits," etc. (Smith, p. 21).

What is it that Wordsworth exactly means by this statement? After the solemn and reiterated assurances of the poet about identity of language between prose and poetry, it is somewhat disconcerting to be told that this identity is liable to be disturbed and even overturned by compliance with the needs of rhyme and metre. Wordsworth's sense is perhaps this : though the words in poetry (in respect of a *line* or a *series of lines*) are the same as in prose, yet owing to the necessities of rhyme and metre, they may have to be arranged in such a way as to destroy this impression of identity and create a virtually new *style* vitally differing from that of prose ; and may lead to the introduction, *in other lines*, of a special poetic diction made up of a new set of words not in everyday use in prose and specially appropriated to the ends of poetry. In other words, Wordsworth, when speaking of the effects of rhyme and metre on language, is thinking of *style* as a whole ; whereas in his previous assertion of identity he had confined himself, more or less exclusively, to the question of *vocabulary*.

Wordsworth's answer to this obvious objection is of a curiously evasive and unsatisfactory nature, and, strangely enough, is based on two altogether different grounds in the two Prefaces of 1800 and 1802. In the earlier Preface his answer is of a simpler and more straightforward kind, though hardly convincing in its nature : the distinction of rhyme and metre is uniform, less liable to variation at the caprice of the writer, and acquiesced in by the free will of both the reader and the poet, whereas innovations with respect to poetic diction are more arbitrary and capricious, and far more likely



to be carried to excess. In short, he places the poet in a rather awkward and difficult situation : he will allow him to use rhyme and metre, not merely because these are his time-honoured privileges, but also on the ground, as is evident from his subsequent discourse on metre, that rhyme and metre have positive qualities of their own: but he will not allow him any liberty in the forging of a more heightened way of expression for meeting the legitimate demands of metre and rhyme. It is also to be seen that Wordsworth's statement does not constitute any answer to the objection that rhyme and metre do, as a matter of fact, overpower the impression of identity in respect of language. Wordsworth does not deny or disprove this ; he simply dwells on the danger of giving the poet an absolutely free hand in the matter of poetic diction. He would much rather that the legitimate demands of rhyme and metre went unfulfilled than allow the poet a freedom with respect to his diction which, as experience has shown, is but too liable to be abused. He enjoins rather a safe avoidance of the risk, although this avoidance would, in its turn, lead to another and possibly a graver risk, than a bold facing and triumphant overcoming of it. He thus ignores the evil effects that are likely to ensue if the poet persists in using the language of prose, while rhyme and metre call for a more heightened way of expression ; he merely indicates that to stick to this language is the safest course for him to pursue.

The arguments advanced in the Preface of 1802 are of a more complex and bewildering kind, and seem to run counter to some of the most cherished views and convictions of the poet. "*.....I answer that the language of such poetry, as is here recommended, is, as far as is possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men ; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life, and, if metre be superad-*



*ded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind"* (Smith, p. 21).

The interest of this answer is twofold ; first, it shows Wordsworth's consciousness of the weakness of his position in the earlier Preface, where he silently ignores the question as to whether a heightening of language is in fact called for in poetry, and as to the legitimate device by which such a heightening must be effected, if artificial poetic diction is to be altogether ruled out ; and secondly, it brings out more and more clearly the startling possibilities, the wellnigh unlimited potentialities of the selective process, as Wordsworth came to conceive of it. A separate section will have to be devoted to an examination of the different senses in which the word "selection" has been used in the Prefaces : in the meantime, let us follow carefully the drift of Wordsworth's argument in order to find out how far he gives a satisfactory solution of the objection which he proposes to meet.

In the very first place, a serious flaw in Wordsworth's argument comes to light. As an answer to the objection that metre and rhyme call for a higher level of language than is ordinarily used in prose—which is a universal requirement of all poetry, he says that *in his poems*, which are written, as far as possible, in a selection of the language really spoken by men, selection serves as an instrument for the natural heightening of style, and dispenses with the need of resorting to any artificial means of elevation. Even admitting all the extravagant claims that the poet makes on behalf of "selection", it is a little difficult to follow how a special device used in Wordsworth's own poems will be available in the case of other poems which are confronted by the same difficulty without having employed the same remedy. When Wordsworth asserted identity of language between prose and poetry, he held it forth as an ideal to be followed by all poetry : now all poetry, on his own admission, does not resort to a selection



of the real language of men. It is, therefore, quite pertinent to ask how this large body of poems will manage to meet the requirements of a heightened style demanded by rhyme and metre. Wordsworth does not offer us any answer to this question, unless he is taken, by implication, to urge a further extension of the real language of men to all classes of poetry as the only permissible device to secure elevation of style without resorting to artificial poetic diction.

Next, Wordsworth urges the "selection ..... will, of itself, form a *distinction* far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life". The first thing about this assertion is to ask: "Distinction between what and what—between poetry and prose or between poetry and the meanness of ordinary conversation?" It is worth remembering that Wordsworth, at this stage of his argument, is talking of the identity of language between *prose* and *poetry*, and how far this identity is modified or overridden by metrical needs. If selection suffices to form a distinction between prose and verse, then what becomes of the central position of Wordsworth, a position which he had been at so much pains to establish, about the identity in respect of language between the two? Wordsworth apparently gives up this position without any compunction or struggle by virtually admitting that a difference between prose and verse is necessary, only stipulating that this difference is to be secured by "selection from the real language of men" instead of by the employment of artificial poetic diction. It may also be urged that identity is asserted only with respect to the *words*, whereas difference is recognized in the matter of *general elevation of style* as a whole, and thus the two positions are not necessarily inconsistent. At any rate Wordsworth's main concern is rather to keep out the demon of "poetic diction" from poetry than to establish identity of language between poetry and prose; he is quite prepared to sacrifice this latter position, if the



*difference* can be secured by any other method less objectionable to him. It may also be asked whether this *difference* is also to be predicated in the case of "good" and "well-written" prose, the language of which was found to be identical with that of poetry only a short while ago.

If, however, the distinction, which selection alone can secure, be taken to subsist as one between poetry and the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary conversation, the question may again be asked as to how the language of ordinary life comes in, in a discussion about the identity of language between prose and poetry. It can be held quite unreservedly that the language of ordinary life tends to follow too low a level, and stands decidedly in need of heightening, if it is to be used as an instrument of poetic expression. The same view cannot be held quite so absolutely in the case of prose, which as a more refined and artistic way of expression certainly rises above the level of conversational language. Moreover, the dangers of the use of a low conversational language are not present in the case of every kind of poetry, but are confined to the special experiments of Wordsworth in the *Lyrical Ballads*. So that the dangers are of Wordsworth's own choice and creation ; the risks arising out of the use of low-pitched colloquial language in poetry are to be guarded against and remedied by a proper method of "selection". Wordsworth has by this time come quite to forget the extravagant claims he had before made on behalf of *rustic* speech, as the most permanent and philosophical language possible, and as specially rich in effects of genuine passion, though the claims are soon after to be revived, and extended to the case of *all real language of passion* (Smih, p. 29, ll. 9—16). He admits, apparently in complete forgetfulness of his past assertions on the subject, that the language of ordinary life is ordinarily so vulgar and mean that it stands in need of the full heightening process which can be achieved by "selection".



The question naturally arises that if Wordsworth had such a low opinion of the ordinary language of conversation,\* why did he try the experiment of using it in poetry at all, unless it were to demonstrate the rare and almost magical virtues of "selection". Without doubt, Wordsworth's final views on the subject are not so colourless as this would seem to suggest; he conceives of "selection" not merely as a negative process serving to undo the evil effects of the language of ordinary conversation, and bringing it on a par with other kinds of styles used in poetry, but as an expedient of a more positive efficacy, one which is calculated to express a higher pitch and intensity of passion on the one hand, and to connect the language of poetry with its real origin in the actual speech of man on the other.

Wordsworth thus assures the reader that so far as his own poems are concerned, the reader will have no cause of grievance on the score of lowness of style, or of complete conformity to prose, as selection will lift the style to a higher level and bring about a sufficient distinction from prose or the ordinary language of conversation. And metre will also co-operate towards the same end: it will also assist at the process of heightening, and the joint effect of selection and metre will be to produce a "dis-similitude altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind". Here the question that metre will *call for* a more heightened style, and thus may necessitate the introduction of an "artificial poetic diction", is met with the reply that provided the process of selection has been judicious and thoroughgoing enough, metre itself will supplement the effects of selection and help towards lifting the style to a higher level. This goes very near to asserting that metre, following in the wake of a judicious process of selection, will supply its own demand, will help in creating that loftier style which it calls for. In speaking of metre as "superadded", Wordsworth suggests that "selection" by itself is quite competent to achieve all



the heightening process that poetry may need, and that metre, without contributing anything positive to the effect, will merely assist in confirming that "impression of dissimilarity" which has already been independently created by "selection". This is a view hardly flattering to the importance of metre, a subject to which Wordsworth does full justice later on ; nor does it recognize that intimate interaction between "metre" and "diction" which is one of the most indisputable facts in poetry.

Indeed, Wordsworth goes even further in meeting the traditional demands of poetry in the shape of vivid metaphors and figures of speech. He is quite ready to welcome these time-honoured ornaments of poetry, provided they are naturally suggested by the passion of the speaker, and are not dragged in through the artificial medium of a set poetic diction which does not originate in the real feelings of man. Much, therefore, depends on a judicious choice of subject-matter, which will naturally provide a scope for the introduction of strong and intense passions, and thus for an abundance of vivid metaphors and figures of speech as the natural expression of these passions. Wordsworth thus is quite prepared to fulfil the traditional needs of poetry, provided this can be done without departing from the real language of men ; he only sets his face against the interweaving of foreign splendour, of such beauties of style as have no natural connection with the passion that is sought to be described. This is a striking departure, indeed, from the ultra-democratic bias of Wordsworth in the choice of incidents and situations for his poems ; he now admits the necessity of selecting the really striking and passionate episodes, not merely for the sake of subject-matter, but also on the score of dignity and elevation of style. It is a pity that Wordsworth did not think of this necessity a little earlier, and did not seek to regulate his actual choice of subject-matter by this principle ; and this belated dawning of wisdom on the poet, presenting such a sharp contrast



with his earlier self-confidence in his revolutionary conceptions about the importance of rustic life, makes his actual\* failures in the field of practice all the more regrettable.

This discussion of the influence of metre and rhyme in overriding the so-called identity of language between prose and poetry has yielded not a few surprising results—it has at any rate proved Wordsworth much less of a stickler on the score of identity of language than his previous utterances on the subject had led us to believe. Wordsworth now admits (1) that metre, as a matter of fact, calls for a more heightened way of expression, so that the identity between prose and poetry, if it still persists, is a matter of mere vocabulary, and does not extend to the general level of style ; (2) that selection from the language really spoken by men does, *in his poems*, serve as an instrument of the heightening of style, lifting the language above the meanness of ordinary life (and presumably above the level of prose also), and thus rendering unnecessary the use of an artificial poetic diction, which must be kept out of poetry at all costs ; (3) that metre, far from requiring any artificial elevation of language, will itself assist in and complete the process of heightening already carried out by “selection” ; (4) that a proper selection of subject-matter will naturally bring in metaphors and figures of speech as a part of the real language of men, and thus will secure the proper dignity and elevation of poetic style ; (5) that thus even without the introduction of artificial poetic diction and the interweaving of foreign splendour a dissimilitude (between the style of poetry and that of prose) will be effected “altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind” ; and (6) that to expect any greater degree of difference or anything gaudier or more ornamental in the matter of style is the outcome of a vicious or depraved taste. Every one of these findings shows an increased appreciation of the conditions that make for a



good poetical satyle and is a wholesome corrective of the excesses and extravagances of his earlier views, but unfortunately this sounder knowledge came to him too late to influence his actual poetic practice in the *Lyrical Ballads*.



# VIII "Selection"—its various meanings : Poetic Diction : how far based on "real language"

It is now time to revert to that all-important word "selection" which is, as it were, the corner-stone of Wordsworth's theory of poetic style, and try to fix the precise senses in which it has been used in different parts of the Preface. It has already been remarked how the connotation of the term goes on widening as fresh difficulties crop up in the interpretation of Wordsworth's theories, and new evidences of their one-sidedness and imperfection emerge into sight. The poet goes on adding new elements of power and possibility to the term, until it seems to be quite transformed from its apparent simplicity, and gathers to itself a mysterious potency fully equal to that attributed to *poetic* or *imaginative creation* in the case of other poets. The perplexity of the reader increases in the same proportion as the connotation of the term, until at length he rises with the impression that with such a magical "open sesame" process to help him on, the poet might safely launch into any absurd or extravagant theory, for the friendly spirit of "selection" is ever at his elbow to rescue him from any unpleasant consequences that may ensue.

(1) As we have seen, the word "selection" is introduced in an apparently simple and casual manner, in the Preface of 1800 by way of modification of a blunter and more unsatisfactory assertion in the Advertisement of 1798 as to the nature of the language to be used in the *Lyrical Ballads*. At first, it seems to suggest nothing more than a removal or correction of the more palpable defects of rustic speech, such as its tendency to repetition and rambling inconsequence. This is the impression produced by the sentence in which Wordsworth enters upon his justification of the adoption of rustic speech, though the word "selection" does not actually occur there. "The language, too, of these men has been adopted (*purified*



indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust" (N. C. Smith, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, p. 14). Moreover, the high eulogy that Wordsworth pronounces upon the speech of rustic people, the terms of almost mystical adoration in which he brings himself to speak of it, his implicit faith in the presence in it of the essential elements of feeling and passion in their purest form, naturally lead us to suppose that here at any rate the imaginative activities of the poet would have to be reduced to their minimum, and that he would have to do nothing more than weed off a few superfluities, straighten out the creases and twists of talk, and fit it to metrical arrangement. Wordsworth's actual poetic practice as well as his subsequent admissions make it, however, quite clear that here also the imaginative faculties of the poet, with their functions of heightening and idealization, are as necessary as ever, and that selection as applied to rustic speech cannot mean merely a process of mechanical sifting, or a simple elimination of the weak links or undersirable elements in a style which is otherwise a perfectly fit and admirable instrument of poetic expression. In the initial stages of the enunciation of the theory, the emphasis and importance seem to rest rather on "the real language of men" than on the "selective process"; and the quiet and unobtrusive way in which it is introduced does not give any forewarning of the superlatively important part that it will be called upon to play later on in the Preface, and in no way prepares us to expect that almost Atlantean breadth of shoulders with which it would cheerfully bear the burden of all the difficulties involved in the enunciation of the poet's new theory.

(2) It is in the course of the discussion on the interaction between metre and language in poetry that the imaginative and idealizing functions implicit in "*selection*" are, as we have already seen, rather startlingly and unexpectedly brought out. There Wordsworth urges that



selection, whenever made with true taste and feeling, will impart dignity and variety to the language of poetry, making it rich and alive with metaphors and figures; that it will introduce an adequate distinction (between prose and poetic style?), and will separate poetry from the meanness and vulgarity of ordinary talk.

This new and altogether unexpected claim advanced on behalf of "selection" has the effect of sharply disabusing the reader's mind of the idea that in his *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth means to refer to a totally new kind of poetry, invested with strange qualities of poetic style. Wordsworth, in his previous glorification of rustic speech tends to imply that the speech actually caught from the lips of rural people has a strange virtue, an intense appropriateness for poetical purposes in it, which might almost dispense with taste and judgment on the part of the poet making use of it. It was exactly on this point that Coleridge joined issue with him, urging that taste and judgment will help a poet in arriving at a true standard of speech and in extricating himself from the snares of a hollow pomp and empty gaudiness in diction. The same taste and judgment that will contribute to the success of the selective process as applied to the language really spoken by men will equally serve in keeping out whatever is undesirable and pompous in poetic diction. If selection had been an infallible remedy for all the ills of language, and could have been applied mechanically without any appeal to taste and judgment, it might have been acclaimed as the panacea that Wordsworth conceives it to be; but this alliance with taste and judgment tends to impair the value of selection taken by itself, and makes us sceptical as to its absolute efficacy. Moreover, there is nothing to confine the process of selection to the real language of men; it may operate with equal efficacy in the case of any other form of language.

A reasonably strong case can, however, be made out on behalf of Wordsworth. It can be urged that mere



taste did not save the Augustan poets from some of their worst excesses and extravagances in the matter of diction ; for taste can be both healthy and depraved, and once it has taken a wrong or oblique turn, its corrective power tends to grow weaker and weaker with every wrong step that is taken. And as to judgment, it almost makes itself the complacent and subservient handmaid to a depraved taste, and sets itself to the task of justifying its worst abuses by an apparent show of reason. Witness the extravagant contemporary praise bestowed upon Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* ; taste must have been hopelessly perverted, and judgment, snoring comfortably on its watch-tower, must have altogether succumbed to the spell of a vicious taste, before such a poem could win the enthusiastic suffrage of every cultured and appreciative reader of the age. A mere appeal to taste and judgment will not do, therefore, when the disease has gone far enough, and there must be something peremptory and dictatorial in the voice that calls back the victims of a long-standing and confirmed error to the true path. A close proximity to the real speech of men was thus prescribed, a little too dogmatically, it may be confessed, by Wordsworth as a check to the straying tendency of the age in the matter of its poetic style. This ideal must be kept in view to help taste in recovering from its disease, and to wake up judgment from its long swoon. Of course, no theory in poetry is sound enough to dispense with the active exercise of taste and judgment; the steep of Parnassus offer no path which can be followed with closed eyes.

Thus the proper interpretation of Wordsworth's position is that he offers a close adherence to real speech not as a substitute for taste and judgment, not as an ideal which is to be mechanically followed—for what is there in the sphere of poetry which can admit of a mere mechanical compliance?—but flings it as a welcome rope to drag the contemporary race of poets out of the mire in which they were hopelessly floundering. Set once more on their feet, and with their face turned the right way, they would again con-



tinue to function as healthily and vigorously as ever. It is quite true in theory that taste and feeling ought to operate as effectively in the case of any other kind of language as in the matter of selection from the real speech of men ; but in practice they will only do this when restored to their full health and vigour by an invigorating contact with this real speech. It thus should not be made a matter of complaint against Wordsworth that he recommends selection to be applied to the real speech of men with true taste and feeling, on the ground that these will serve as faithful guides on every occasion, Wordsworth's very contention being that they had ceased to offer faithful guidance for a long time past, and can only be made to function aright by being brought into renewed contact with the actual speech of men.

The point about which Wordsworth is specially anxious, and the defect that he particularly seeks to guard against, is the tendency to interweave foreign splendour into the texture of language ; meaning by "foreign splendour" that collocation of images and expressions which, however beautiful in themselves, cannot be naturally connected with the passion that is sought to be described. This raises a difficulty, for it necessitates the establishment of a standard which will determine the relevancy or otherwise of particular images and forms of expression as applied to particular feelings or passions. Who is to decide as to whether an image used to express a particular passion is connected with it naturally or arbitrarily; whether any one case is, in effect, an instance of "foreign splendour" or not? The answer unquestionably is, it is the poet's instinct, his sense of imaginative fitness, that can be the only infallible tribunal. Wordsworth, however, is afraid of granting this perfect imaginative latitude to the poet, of accepting the decisions of the poetic imagination as the supreme arbiter of the point at issue. His mind is haunted by the visions (visions which are realities as well) of the many lapses and backslidings in the actual practice of contemporary poets, the innumerable instances, occurring on every side of him, in which sham imagination, unrecognized



as such, proves but a broken reed to lean upon, and even provokes and encourages the very evils (of a hollow and empty gaudiness) which it ought to have checked. The true corrective of such defects would surely have been the substitution of a genuine imagination for the spurious one that was installed in its place. But true imagination is a thing that cannot be extemporized off hand ; it cannot be induced by the application of any fixed rules or principles known to man.

The real trouble with imagination, as with taste and judgment, was that it had allowed itself to be stifled under the weight of a cumbrous poetic diction, divorced from every real or genuine emotion on the part of the poet, to use too complacently a language consecrated by past poetic usage, although wrested violently from its proper context, and drifting far away from its basis of true personal feeling. It was only by clearing away this bird-lime of a vicious poetic diction that the wings of imagination could once more be made to flap vigorously, and flutter its way into the upper heights; otherwise a simple recommendation about using true imagination will be but mere idle talk, a pious wish that would lead to no performance. Wordsworth, therefore, thinks that he has hit upon a device which is better calculated to exert a steadying and purifying influence on the workings of the imagination; he recommends a close adherence to the language really spoken by men, which, he is quite sure, will save poetry from straying and floundering in the matter of its speech, and enable imagination to function aright. At the same time to save imagination from being put out of court altogether, he introduces the condition of selection, which is to mould the words of real speech into a fit expression for poetry. But in doing so, he leaves the relative value of the two elements undecided, though the almost disproportionate stress that he lays upon the necessity of following the real language of men would tend to show that the considered it to be by far the more important factor.

It is difficult, however, to acquiesce in the soundness of this



relative estimate; the language really spoken by men may have afforded an occasional guidance to the poet by serving to remind him of the ideal of realism, of the fact that he must keep before his view the convincing realistic impression that a poet must aim at, no less than a novelist. But beyond this it has no further utility, unless we are prepared to fall in with the mystical doctrine of Wordsworth that the actual language spoken by men in a moment of passionate excitement contains purer and more quintessential poetry than was ever rendered in the creative efforts of poets, and that poetic expression is but a faint and distant echo of the native force and poignancy of untaught, unrefined passion. Imagination, it would rather seem, has an immeasurably more important part to play in the forging of poetic speech ; if sufficiently strong and vital, it achieves a simplicity, a convincing truth of accent, quite unassisted by, and without any conscious imitation of, the real standard of speech. Thus the process of selection, which is a mainly imaginative process, far outweighs in importance the other condition of approximation to the language of real life ; and indeed Wordsworth himself, in a moment of self-forgetfulness, when the controversial purpose has ceased to be uppermost in his mind, bears witness to this by an involuntary admission that adherence to the speech of real life is but a subsidiary factor, providing additional security to the steps of the poet—".....while he is only selecting from the real language of men, or which amounts to the same thing, *composing accurately in the spirit of such selection*, he is treading upon safe ground, and we know what we are to expect from him." (Smith, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, p. 30).

It is here that Wordsworth rises to a full consciousness of the element of imaginative heightening underlying the process of selection, and of the conditions necessary to the attainment of a worthy poetic style. Although he makes an approximation to the real speech of man the starting-point of all his efforts at the reform of poetic diction, yet he has at least recognized the importance of



imagination in the evolution of the right sort of style for poetry. But though his theory is quite unexceptionable in its analysis of the two factors that go to build up poetic style, yet we feel that in his actual practice the right sort of synthesis has not been achieved. In some of his poems, there is actual speech untransformed by the imagination ; in some others there is imagination working at white heat and achieving a tense simplicity of utterance without any very pronounced suggestion of its origin in the actual speech of men. The *Lucy Poems*, or *The Affliction of Margaret*, gives us poetic style at its best, but in spite of its extreme purity and simplicity, it does not strike us as having emanated straight from the lips of rustic talkers. That theory, which does not intimately influence the practice of the poet, tends to stand a little suspect, and more than a little discredited: and the same, I am afraid, must be predicated of Wordsworth's theory of selection, which is but imperfectly realized in his poetic practice.

(3) Yet another function of a rather curious and undefined kind is allotted to the principle of selection, which is made to link itself with one of the most cherished theories of Wordsworth—*viz.* that poetry, even when dealing with tragic or painful themes, always leaves behind it an overbalance of pleasure. Thus selection will aid towards establishing this balance of pleasurable impression by toning down harsh and disagreeable features in the subject-matter as well as the language of poetry, and the over-intensity of pain which it would otherwise convey. Selection is therefore lifted over to a higher plane than that of language merely, and is made responsible for the total imaginative impression of poetry, its subtle appeal to our feeling of joy. With its functions thus enlarged, "selection" is, however, apt to lose its separate existence, and to merge itself in that indefinable imaginative creation which lends to poetry all its nameless magic. Thus Wordsworth's theory tends to lose all its originality except as far as it turns upon a close imitation of the actual



speech of man, for if selection becomes indistinguishable from imaginative creation, then it reduces itself to a factor insisted upon by all poets worth the name, and recognized by them as essential to all good poetry, instead of being a novel and original contribution of Wordsworth alone. Of course, full credit is due to Wordsworth for his subtle and original remark about the overbalance of joy in poetry, which is an attempt at a conscious interpretation of that unconscious joy which we all feel in the poetic treatment of even painful subjects. But at the same time the value of "selection" as a contribution to the theory of poetic diction tends to dwindle away in exact proportion to the enlargement of its scope, and to the closeness of its identification with imagination as a whole.

Selection, as has been seen already, will go hand in hand with a recognition of the supreme and unsurpassable aptness of the language of reality, and a distrust of the suggestions of the poet's own fancy and imagination as compared with this real language. This mystic faith of Wordsworth in the language really spoken by men makes the poet's part in the business of writing poetry not a little obscure and doubtful. If men talk purer poetry than what poets embody in their work, then the business of writing poetry reduces itself to a mere transcript of the spoken language, and the ears ought to play a more prominent part in it than the imaginative faculties. The work of selection is also circumscribed to a mere toning down of the over-excitement of speech with a view to yielding a balance of joy : it serves to keep the temperature down, to prevent passion from boiling over ; so that apparently it does not cover any of that heightening or idealizing process that is one of the time-honoured functions of poetry. It is a mere transcript of somebody else's speech, and the poet's sole function is to keep the copy neat and prevent the outlines from getting blurred. Indeed, Wordsworth is very often haunted by similar



doubts as to his share of the credit for the poems he writes : in the pastoral poem *Pet Lamb*, he is inclined, on mature thoughts, to give more than half the credit to the girl who supplies the emotional mood for which the poet merely finds words. This is certainly a more normal case than that on which Wordsworth builds his theory of selection, the poet transcribing the words of actual speech and modifying them not overmuch with the specific object of extracting a balance of joy. In *The Excursion*, Book I, again, he shows a similar tendency to belittle the words or the vocal part of poetry, counting words but as mere under-agents in the poetic soul, and looking upon imaginative sensibility as a much more important factor than the gift of poetic expression. He thus sponsors a new race of silent poets, of whom the world has heard but too little up till now—a race of mute Miltons unknown to fame, whom yet he acclaims as “poets sown by nature”. Again, while extolling actual speech, and minimizing the active functions of the poet, in the same breath he is careful to assure the reader that selection will have the effect of lifting the poem above the level of ordinary conversation in respect of language, and will naturally bring in a passionate and figurative style, though here also a good deal will depend on a judicious choice of subject-matter or the feeling which is sought to be expressed.

It is difficult to reconcile the two aforesaid views with each other—the view that invests the real utterances of men under stress of passion with a liveliness and power of which the language of poetry is but a faint and feeble imitation ; and that which apologises for a too close imitation on the part of poetry of the language of ordinary life, and recognizes the need for lifting poetic speech to a higher plane, a rarer degree of expressiveness. No doubt it is possible to conceive of situations in which “selection” acts as a palliative against the over-excitement of natural speech ; but Wordsworth would have planted himself on surer ground if he had advanced concrete illustrations where the language



really spoken by men exceeded in vividness of truth or pitch of passion the language of poetry, or if his own ideas on the subject had upon them the warrant of a wider or more universal experience. Certainly his own poetry is quite empty of any such illustrations; the actual speeches of his rustic characters (as contrasted with the poet's comments upon them) have nowhere that stamp of authentic passion, that convincing eloquence of truth which might justify the rather extravagant claim made on their behalf. Whenever they open their lips, and the poet is not there with his idealizing processes, they leave the impression of being but poor prattlers after all, and the poem is certainly by no means the better for their prattlings. What instance of a natural outpouring of passion can be matched, in point of poignancy and expressiveness, with the language that is forged (I don't know how it can be spoken of as "selected") by the poet in the imaginary situation of *The Affliction of Margaret*? Even where the poet is simple, and uses no words that could not have been used as well by a rustic speaker, the simplicity he achieves is of a vitally different kind from the natural simplicity of ordinary speech. Could we ever conceive of the *Lucy Poems* as put into the mouth of a rustic mourner with nothing but the natural promptings of passion to inspire him? Wordsworth had, as we have seen, historical reasons for his distrust of the imaginative instinct of poets, and for referring them to some fixed rules for guidance, when their imagination had been playing them false ever since the days of Homer, and leading them to inartistic imitations of poetic diction. But granting all this, it is nevertheless equally true that the highest effects are unattainable where genuine imagination is absent.

Much sounder views on the subject of poetic diction are indeed to be come across in the Appendix to the Preface added in 1802. There we see the poet's theories on the point considerably sobered down, and shorn almost completely of the elements of extravagance and inconsistency that had roused such a stormy opposition



against them. In discussing the origin of poetic diction, and tracing it back to the practice of the earliest poets, Wordsworth is constrained to admit that "the language of the earliest poets was felt to differ materially from ordinary language"—an admission so long obstinately withheld, and which, if made earlier, would have saved him from many of his lapses in both theory and practice. The poet thus admits that poetic diction, even in its purity, and before the subsequent process of sophistication set in, was separated from the ordinary language of men. From this it follows that poetic diction, freed from its latter-day corruptions and restored to its original purity, will not be identical with the language really spoken by men, even with a selection of that language, unless selection is used in the rather unusual sense of a new creation. To write, therefore, in the ordinary language of men is not to revert to the time-honoured practice of the earliest poets, but to start a new experiment unsupported by past usage ; it does not restore the equilibrium, but inclines the balance too much on the opposite side. As an explanation of this difference between the earliest poetic diction and ordinary speech, Wordsworth merely concedes that this was because the former "was the language of extraordinary occasions ; but it was really spoken by men, language which the Poet himself had uttered when he had been affected by the events which he described or which he had heard uttered by those around him" ( N. C. Smith, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, p. 42). In other words, both poetic diction and ordinary speech have their basis in real usage, the only difference between them being that the former is the natural utterance of *extraordinary*, and the latter of *ordinary*, occasions in life. If that is so, then it is the nature of the occasion, of the kind and level of feeling that is sought to be expressed, that must determine the fitness of the language used ; and no fault could be found with Wordsworth if he had taken the view that in the *Lyrical Ballads*



he had chosen to confine himself to ordinary subject-matter, for which the language really spoken would be an adequate expression ; if, that is to say, he had taken his stand, with a fearless consistency, on the ground that a commonplace subject-matter naturally leads to a low and homely expression.

But the case is not really so simple as that ; the poet in Wordsworth is never completely silenced by the theorist in him, and is ever whispering of the special needs and claims of poetry. It is this which makes him realize the inadequacy of mere spoken language for the needs of poetry, however low and commonplace its subject-matter may be, and prompts the addition of that word of dubious import—"selection". It is this which makes him so anxious to see that the language of his poems, even when they deal with ordinary feelings, does not sink to the grovelling level of ordinary speech, and that the daring, figurative language, which is the authentic speech of poetry, may naturally come in the wake of a judicious selection of passions.

All this makes it quite clear that Wordsworth, in his protest against the unreality of eighteenth-century poetic diction, over-emphasizes the importance of the realistic basis which must form the foundation of all poetic language, and correspondingly underestimates the subtle heightening process which must be at work to refine the crudities of actual speech, and make it fit for the higher ends of poetry, imagining this latter to be rather too easily attainable. He himself commits the mistake which he detects in Taylor's exposition of the meaning of "imagination" (Preface to Poems of 1815, Smith, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, p. 156), where he gently ridicules the latter for being "so intent upon what he had discovered of the foundation, as to conclude his task without once looking up at the superstructure". Wordsworth himself is so intent upon the realistic basis of poetic language, and makes so much of it, that he runs the risk of almost completely ignoring, at any rate of seriously minimizing, the superstructure built by the imagination on this foundation.



He even carries his one-sidedness so far as to suggest that both foundation and superstructure emerge spontaneously out of the actual speech ; and this, not only in the feelings of ordinary life, but also on those extraordinary occasions which are celebrated in early epic and heroic poetry. The poetic diction of these early poems, as Wordsworth assures us, "was really spoken by men,.....was language which he (the poet) had heard uttered by those around him". There is surely a big gulf which we all recognize between the primitive heroic days, and these degenerate times of ours ; life in those ages was more high-pitched and strenuous, and planned in more heroic proportions. But it would doubtless constitute an excessive glorification of the past to hold that it had the better of us no less in a universally diffused poetic spirit than in heroism of action, that the noble poetic diction that we meet with in the pages of Homer was actually caught from the lips of the warriors round about him, and was but a transcript of the ordinary speech of the time. That must have been a wonderful age indeed, in which people could fight like Achilles as well as talk like Homer !

Wordsworth was no doubt rendering an inestimable service in insisting that poetic speech must be based on real usage, and that a poem written in unreal poetic diction was in as bad a way as a building that had slipped off its foundation. But he was going too far when he urged almost exclusive attention to this realistic basis of the language of poetry, and put it forward as the all-important factor that embraced and included everything else within it. Indeed, the real language of men, if it has any place in poetry at all, appears there strangely glorified and transformed. The language of good poetry rarely suggests an origin in actual conversation ; the impression that we carry away from it is not that it was actually heard on the lips of men, but that it might *conceivably* have been used by them, so strong and convincing is the feeling of reality that it conveys, and so perfect is the expression that it gives to the feeling described. Above



all, it is real in the sense that it shuts out every suggestion of unreality and insincerity ; the accents ring true, and have not about them the hollow reverberations of a simulated feeling. This impression of reality is true of the treatment of feeling as a whole, but a realistic basis cannot be assigned to every word or image that is used in the description. It is attained not by a servile conformity to the actual order or range of the spoken words, but by an imaginative modification of them which is justified by its effect. This was a truth which Wordsworth tended to ignore in the enunciation of his theory ; that is why he betrays such an anxiety to cling to the hem of the spoken word, forgetting the high privileges of a poet and the instinctively sure hold that he has upon truth of expression without tying himself to the apron-strings of actual speech.



## IX Metre—its place in poetry

WORDSWORTH now anticipates and proceeds to answer another objection. Since he is unwilling to concede to poetry any of its special graces of style and privileges, and insists on the identity in language between prose and poetry, and since he has also recognized in metre a positive snare which leads poets into the use of "poetic diction"—a temptation which Wordsworth himself overcame by the substitution for it of the passionate and figurative language of natural feeling, why, it may be asked, did he dally with the temptation at all? He would have suffered little by such a change, according to his own theory; he would rather have felt himself freer and more unhampered by such a procedure. Indeed, the whole drift of Wordsworth's language in his Prefaces had led us to believe that setting, as he does, such a little store by the distinctive graces of poetic diction, and holding such uncompromisingly democratic views on the subject, he would attach but little importance to metre and rhyme, and would be prepared to give them the go-by without making much of a wry face. But his answer to this anticipated objection takes us rather by surprise, by revealing him quite unexpectedly as a panegyrist of metre. Of course, in his exaltation of the virtues of metre, he does not positively contradict his previous utterances; for beyond saying that rhyme and metre, though they create a difference between prose and poetry, do not justify the use of a special "poetic diction", he did not make any other pronouncement on the subject in the earlier part of the Preface. It was on this point that Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* had joined issue with him; according to Coleridge, metre and rhyme produce a sort of "medicated atmosphere" in poetry which justifies, and even makes imperative, the use of a special pomp and splendour in the matter of its language. But as to the desirability or otherwise of rhyme and metre



in themselves, apart from their influence in modifying the language of poetry, Wordsworth had hitherto remained silent. It is therefore, with a good deal of curiosity, if not of positive expectancy, that the reader turns to Wordsworth's views on this interesting point.

Wordsworth begins in a rather apologetic strain. Even granting that prose is as good an instrument of expression as poetry, and that the writer in prose has as wide a choice in respect of subject-matter, why is he to be condemned for having provided additional delight to the reader—since it is innocent delight that he provides, delight not purchased by the sacrifice of any of the vital points urged in his theory? Metre provides a superadded charm to the more solid delight yielded by a just representation of human passions “in a selection of language really used by men”; and he must be a captious critic indeed who complains of the additional good things brought to his palate. But if the old argument is re-urged that metre, unaccompanied by a heightened style, gives a rude shock to our preconceptions, and becomes more distressing than delightful, Wordsworth has to say in reply that such critics strangely *underrate the power of metre*; that metre, by itself, has a power to please, though unaccompanied by the heightened style usually associated with it. Witness, for example, poems written upon still humbler subjects, and in a more naked and simple style—by which description he undoubtedly refers to the ballads—which have actually given delight to generations of readers; and if the ballads have given delight, why should not Wordsworth's poems, which are more ambitious in intention, and written in a more impassioned and heightened style, be found acceptable?

There is a ring of strangeness about this answer which provokes a little deeper scrutiny. In the first place, ballads are spoken of not as representing the ideal to which Wordsworth sought to conform, but rather as marking the lowest limit of nakedness and simplicity in



point of subject-matter and expression admissible in poetry, and consistent with the ends of delight it proposes to give. In other words, ballads are held up rather as warnings than as examples. This seems quite incompatible with the rather exaggerated respect in which the revived ballads tended to be held by all the pioneers of romanticism, and especially with the rapturous language in which Wordsworth himself testifies to his own debt to the work of Percy (Essay supplementary to Preface, 1815, Smith, p. 193). Here is an instance of self-contradiction, which is not surely creditable to the sureness and constancy of Wordsworth's literary tastes. In the second place, the timid, apologetic way in which he speaks of the language of his own poems as but one degree removed from the extreme nakedness and childish simplicity of the language of ballads, and therefore entitled to a little more deference than the latter, is strangely out of accord with the exalted tone in which he elsewhere acclaims the expressive powers of the "selected real language" used throughout his poems, and his confident claims on their behalf as to their possession of all the elements requisite for good and original poetry. These inconsistencies, recurring time and again, force the conclusion that Wordsworth must have been liable to strange misgivings and to sudden sinkings of the heart in the course of his enunciation of his theory, when he came to reflect on his own daring defiance of accepted standards, and the boldness of the challenge that he flung in the face of the orthodox literary creed of the day.

But Wordsworth carries his panegyric of metre to a yet greater length : so much so that the question of poetic diction, which was the real point at issue, is thrust into the background, and strangely relegated to a mere secondary position. Metre is credited with the power both of toning down over-excitement caused by a too intense and realistic presentation of painful feelings, as



also of heightening and raising the pitch of words in themselves inadequate for their purpose. The softening power of metre is supported on grounds not quite consistent with one another.

(1) In the first place, metre represents an element of regularity in the midst of the abnormal excitement of poetic creation ;

(2) Secondly, on account of its association with more ordinary feelings, generally of a pleasurable character and less excited moods, it serves as a restraining influence, tempering the otherwise intolerable intensity of a too pathetic description ; it is, as it were, a cooler breath from the ordinary world, serving to reduce the temperature of the white-hot atmosphere in which poetic creation is generally carried on.

(3) The subtlest and most adequate reason is added in the Preface of 1802 ; metre tends to divest the language of poetry in a certain degree of its reality, and throws a kind of ideal veil over the words, thereby blunting the sharp edge of their impressions and making pathos tolerable. As examples of this power of metre, Wordsworth remarks that the pathetic parts of Shakespeare are more endurable than those of *Clarissa Harlowe*, and that even the artless metre of the ballads has the effect of moderating the pathos of their tragic narratives—advancing, by way of parenthesis, a somewhat similar claim on behalf of his own poems.

An attentive examination of these arguments tends to reveal that strange and perverse union of truth and error, of a keen insight into seminal principles and curious, even ludicrous lapses in their application, which have already perplexed us more than once in the Wordsworthian Prefaces. The first argument is all right, though it was left to Coleridge to give it a happier and more philosophical expression in his *Biographia Literaria*. "There must be not only a partnership, but a union ; an interpenetration of passion and will, of spontaneous impulse and voluntary



purpose." But the second and third arguments seem to embody curiously different standpoints. The moderating power of metre is ascribed, first to its representing the ordinary world in the too tense and high-pitched world of poetic creation ; and secondly, to its spreading a veil of unreality over the too sharp and real impressions of the words in poetry. In other words, metre is both a link with the world of ordinary feelings, when poetry deals with emotions of extraordinary intensity, as also the means of conveying an idealizing touch when the words of poetry are too forcible and realistic ; it is a link with reality as well as a means of producing an impression of unreality, thus apparently combining incongruous functions. Of course, from one point of view these incongruities are more apparent than real ; the impressions of poetry are so subtle and complex, and they have so many facets, some pointing to reality and others opening the vistas of the unknown, that incongruities can be better reconciled in it than the more prosaic intelligence thinks to be possible. The influence of metre, again, is so indefinable, that anyone attempting to reduce its subtle and elusive appeals to a precise estimate finds that it combines contradictory traits which fall within opposite categories. Wordsworth may thus be perfectly right, in the somewhat incongruous claims he puts forward on behalf of metre. But in this exaltation of metre he has unconsciously drifted far away from the original question that engrossed him—the question of poetic diction ; and the reader, carried away by the eulogy of the poet, not unnaturally thinks that the mystic virtues of metre may triumph over even the most unsuitable poetic diction, and conceives this latter question to be but of a secondary importance.

Nor is Wordsworth quite flawless in the matter of his illustrations. While admitting the truth of the poet's remark as to the fact that the pathos of Shakespeare is more tolerable than that of Richardson, it is yet possible



to differ as to the ground of this undeniable difference. The pathos of Shakespeare is, by itself, of a purer and more spiritualized quality, and is imaginatively allied with nobler and more beautiful images than that of Richardson, which seems to be achieved by an almost intolerable accumulation of minute details without any attempt to lift the subject to a higher imaginative level, or encompass it with wider horizons ; so that, to ascribe the whole difference to metre and metre alone seems like exalting it much above its proper merit. Then again, Wordsworth's comparison of his own poems to the ancient ballads in connection with his illustration of the power of metre to tone down painful impressions seems to be beside the point. Whatever may be the merits of the *Lyrical Ballads*—and they are high enough in many respects—the ballad-like quality, the power to describe tragic situations and feelings in a swift narrative rush, is not to be found among them.

Wordsworth has not yet exhausted his enumeration of the virtues of metre; he ascribes to it another power of a reverse kind. It has not only the power of moderating over-excitement and tempering painful impressions, but also operates to lift naked and low-pitched words to a higher emotional level. This is in direct opposition to the view of Coleridge, who holds that metre, by reason of its providing a medicated atmosphere, demands a more daring and figurative language, and the failure to supply this sort of expression tends to disappoint us of our legitimate expectations and thus robs us of an expected delight. It is likewise falsified by Wordsworth's own practice in the *Lyrical Ballads*, where we find that the low words are not only not lifted and redeemed by metre, but seem grotesquely out of place in their metrical framework. Indeed, Wordsworth himself is conscious that words in themselves too naked and bare and prosaic do not shine very much in being strung together in a metrical line.

In the very beginning of his argument on behalf of metre



he lays down a very sound and useful condition, which unfortunately he does not always observe in practice : "Where the style is manly, and the subject of some importance, words metrically arranged will long continue to impart...pleasure" (Smith, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, p. 32). In many of Wordsworth's poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* these two conditions do not seem to have been always kept in view; and the addition of metre not only does not improve the situation, but exposes the unfitness of the words in a stronger light. Such lines as the following from *Simon Lee* bring out the rather insidious nature of the alliance of rhyme with weak and halting words ; it kisses only to betray.

And though you with your utmost skill,  
From labour could not wean them,  
Alas ! 'tis very little, all  
Which they can do between them.

The apologists of Wordsworth have tried to save his theory of poetic diction in its entirety by throwing the whole blame on his choice of subject-matter. The individual words, they urge, are all right, and they gain immensely in expressive power in a different context, in the treatment of a worthier subject. It is a proof of the *naïveté* of Wordsworth's mind—a *naïveté* begotten of a mystic temperament—to try to find out the expressive value of words by detaching them from the texture of style. Not even the most hardened pseudo-classicist would think of putting a ban on any one of the words used in the above-mentioned stanza ; even classical style at its highest cannot maintain its metallic splendour throughout, but must needs come down to humbler words at intervals, as links between its more gorgeous expressions. Thus to say that no stigma attaches to the individual words themselves is to advance something which has scarcely ever been denied. If words are ever found to be low and humble and unworthy of the dignity of poetry,



it is because of their being yoked to the service of an unworthy subject, or of flat and commonplace thoughts and feelings in the case of even a worthy and promising subject. Words are thus indissolubly linked with thoughts and subject-matter ; they stand or fall together. There must be something unsound and suspicious in that advocacy of simple words which also leads to triviality of thought and subject-matter.

It is no real defence of the poet to urge that here he fails not because the words are humble, but because the thoughts and feelings are trivial. Either baldness of words and triviality of thought proceed from the same tainted source in the mind of the poet, the same preference of the mean and grovelling ; or simple words are put to an extreme test in which they fail, by being used to express commonplace feelings as well. At any rate, the poet who takes it upon himself to show that words used in real life are good enough for the purposes of poetry must take care not to complicate issues by choosing a commonplace, uninspiring theme which suggests weak feelings and jejune reflections ; it is his fault if the words do not get a fair chance of proving their merit. If humble words bring with them at times the temptation of dragging in unpoetic moods, then they stand suspect, notwithstanding their splendid service on other and nobler occasions. Wordsworth invests both humble words and common themes with a mystic glory which unfortunately proves rather unsteady and flickering in its nature : the implicitness of his mystic faith sometimes blinds him to the absence of genuine poetic inspiration, and the result is occasional abject lapses, in spite of magnificent triumphs on other occasions.

Thus the conclusion at which we arrive is that words, in order to be capable of being lifted by the metre and to catch up its subtler thrill and cadences, must, in spite of their humble look, have a power of suggestion and evocation which belongs not so much to themselves as to the way in which they are strung together in a metrical



line and the mood of excitement which presides at their collocation. Words lacking in this quality are rather shamed than glorified by metrical arrangement, and the shame and the glory can both be exemplified from the actual practice of Wordsworth. In other words, it is more a question of general style than of the choice of individual words which counts in estimating the heightening effect of metre. In talking of the influence of metre on the words in poetry, it is all the more necessary to emphasize the safeguards which Wordsworth laid down in theory because they tended to be neglected in practice. It is only in the case of comic or humorous poetry that metre adds a certain element of vivacity to even low and commonplace words.

Then Wordsworth adverts to two deeper reasons, rooted in the very nature of things in general and poetry in particular, which justify the use of metre. The appeal of metre depends on the general pleasure afforded by contrasts in the sphere of art. This is a more general description of that "interpenetration of passion and will, of spontaneous impulse and voluntary purpose" which Coleridge subsequently stated to be the vital element in metre. The second reason springs from the peculiarity of Wordsworth's own conceptions about poetry, and is an interesting illustration of the depth and originality—albeit a little partial and one-sided—of Wordsworth's mind. He links up the question of metre with the famous doctrine as to the origin of poetry in emotions recollected in tranquillity. It is beyond our present purpose to dwell on the soundness and adequacy of this dictum ; though not certainly covering all kinds of poetry, *e.g.* the poetry of Burns or of Shelley, it is, at any rate, an admirably apt characterization of Wordsworth's own poems. But what mainly concerns us now about it is the stress which Wordsworth lays on the fact that the emotion which directly leads to poetic creation is not quite the same thing as the emotion which is excited by the actual incidents



of life, and which furnishes the original impulse of inspiration. A certain interval always elapses between the first gush of feeling and the revival of that feeling for poetic embodiment ; the revived emotion is a purged and refined version of the original one, mainly differing from the latter in its production of an overbalance of pleasure in the mind of the poet. However painful and pathetic the original feeling might have been, the revived feeling which directly leads on to poetic creation must be marked by a preponderance of the element of joy. Out of this psychological condition of the poet's mind at the time of poetic creation Wordsworth evokes a strange justification of metre. The poet, whom nature provides with an overbalance of joy at the time of writing, lies under a similar obligation to impart the same joy to the reader : he must try to induce in the mind of the reader a reflection of his own mental state, and metre plays a very important part in turning the scales on the side of pleasure in the reader's mind. Thus metre becomes not merely a matter of choice for the poet, something which he can take up or lay aside at pleasure, but a kind of sacred duty which he cannot neglect without proving false to his own high calling. It is only a poet, and a poet who keenly watches his own mind at work and has brooded long and intensely over the complex inner conditions that impel the artist to poetic creation, who could have put forward such an inevitable reason on behalf of metre.

In illustration of the power of metre to lift low or humble words, Wordsworth adduces the poems of Pope, who, "by the power of verse alone, has contrived to render the plainest commonsense interesting, and even frequently to invest it with the appearance of passion". (See Sampson, *Coleridge's Biographia Literaria* and *Wordsworth's Prefaces and Essays*, Cambridge University Press, p. 241. This passage was omitted from the version of 1815.)

However fruitful and original in the matter of theor-



izing, Wordsworth is not always very happy in his choice of illustrations ; and here also we are perplexed by the same mixture of truth and error in his statement. It is no doubt true, in a sense, to urge that metre redeems the prosaic and commonplace thoughts of Pope, and lends to them a distinction they would not otherwise have attained ; written in prose, the same thoughts would have lost half their sparkle and brilliance. And yet Pope is hardly the poet whom one would mention as an instance of cunning artistry in metre ; and in him the effect is achieved not so much by the heightening effect of metre on simple words, as by a deliberate effort at pithiness and condensation, owing something indeed to metre, but more to an independent trait of the poet's mind. If Pope creates the impression of passion even through the expression of commonplace thoughts, it is not by virtue of metre alone that he does this. No doubt metre aids his efforts towards compression of style ; but more is achieved through the native energy of the poet's mind, and his innate hardness of disposition that impels him to sharpen every word that he uses, and to carry condensation to its furthest limits, in order to administer a telling blow at every stroke of the pen. And whatever cogency there might have been in this illustration is almost lost, when a similar "appearance of passion" conferred by metre is claimed on behalf of Wordsworth's own poem of *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*. The element of passion in the poem, if any, is latent in the poet's imagination, and is hardly brought out in actual expression ; and for such rare traces of passion and energy of expression as may be found in it, the metre is not certainly responsible and can hardly claim any credit. And as for the poet's faith that the story has been much better told in verse than it would have been in prose—it is one of those agreeable self-delusions in a poet's mind which are so often in evidence in his judgment of the off-springs of his own brain.



This long discourse on metre now comes to an end ; and, as was before remarked, this prolonged dwelling on the virtues of metre has the effect of lowering, to some extent, the importance of poetic diction, as it goes to show that other factors count as much, if not more, in the total impression of poetry. We are inevitably led to think that the question of diction can hardly have the same vital importance as Wordsworth ascribes to it in the earlier part of the Preface, as there is the ubiquitous influence of metre to reckon with—an influence that by heightening the low and by lowering the high-pitched goes a great way in drawing the wheels of poetry out of the ruts of its language. In this protracted survey of metre there are but a few remarks indirectly bearing on the question of poetic diction, and helping us to define Wordsworth's precise notions on the subject. In the first place, in the very opening sentence which introduces the subject of metre, Wordsworth has the remark which has been already quoted : "When the style is manly, and the subject of some importance, *words metrically arranged* will long continue to impart ..... pleasure". From this it clearly follows that Wordsworth expected a good deal of, poetic pleasure from *words metrically arranged*. Now, metrical arrangement may quite naturally involve a violation of the strict prose order ; and the complacency with which Wordsworth looks upon this metrical arrangement, and the pleasurable effect he ascribes to it, goes to show that he could not have an insuperable objection to a departure from the prose order, and in his insistence on the identity in language between prose and verse he was after all thinking more of vocabulary than of arrangement. It has already been pointed out how this limitation of scope tells seriously against the speculative depth and originality of Wordsworth's theory ; and that his deviations from prose order, dictated by needs of metre and rhyme (e.g. *The mountains when to cross (The Thorn) ; Of years he has upon his back, No doubt, a burthen weighty*



(*Simon Lee*), often lead to uncouth inversions and awkward twists, especially where the thoughts are of a low pitch, and likewise weaken that resemblance to actual speech or, as Wordsworth puts it, to the real language of men, the fitness of which for the purposes of poetry it was his main object to prove. But these casual remarks, gleaned from another context, when the poet's mind is occupied with a different subject, are of much help in lighting up the obscurity of his real intention with respect to the vexed question of poetic diction.

There is, in another part of the argument, a tribute paid to the transforming power of metre on the language of poetry. This is to be found in a clause added in the Preface of 1802 to the poet's testimony as to the delightful effect of metre. "Now the music ..... an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language, closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely ....." (Smith, p. 35). Here Wordsworth shows his consciousness of the fact that though the language of real life is to be the basis of poetry, yet, acted upon by the transforming power of metre, it will yield an impression very different from that of naked realism. This goes to prove that his ideal, in the matter of the use of the language of real life, was not really the attainment of a neutral style, a style not rising much above the pitch and level of prose, that Coleridge seeks to ascribe to him: the words were the words of actual speech, but the total impression would be something immeasurably higher. And though his theory led him, in many cases, to a neutral, even a positively bald and naked style, yet, on other occasions, it results in a splendid vindication of this higher ideal. Such a poem as *Lucy Gray* or *We are Seven* shows the ideal glamour which Wordsworth could attach to simple words of everyday speech, though this glamour springs from a root deeper and more personal than a mere clever metrical manipulation.



## x *How far was Wordsworth conscious of his defects*

THERE is another very interesting question that inevitably suggests itself to every reader of the *Lyrical Ballads*—did Wordsworth's mysticism completely blind him to the triviality and meanness of many of his subjects, or was he conscious at all that in some of his poems at any rate his choice of subject-matter and method of treatment fell below the minimum standards of poetry? Such blindness to everyday suggestions and normal valuations is a part of the mystic temperament, and constitutes not a little of its special glory and appeal. That poems like *The Thorn* and *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*, in spite of the latent vein of passion in them, and in spite of the poet's intention to invest them with a supernatural shudder, have no very heart-thrilling quality about them; that pieces like *The Sailor's Mother* or *The Childless Father* have in them merely the raw materials of poetry and not the finished product, a distant possibility of pathos and not a pathetic effect imaginatively worked out; that in these cases the mystic importance of the subjects misled the poet as to the precise quality and extent of their imaginative appeal, and that he mistook his own feelings raised spontaneously by the subjects for feelings created by his own art in the mind of the reader;—how far did any of these problems stir in the heart of the somewhat stolid and self-centred poet? This is a question of absorbing interest; and Wordsworth has done something to satisfy the curiosity of the reader in this respect by betraying at times an uneasy consciousness that perhaps he has deviated into the wrong track, and by offering a defence for his supposed lapses.

It is in the Advertisement prefixed to the Edition of 1798 that Wordsworth furnishes the most elaborate statement of the case against himself. "Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading the book to its con-



clusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness ; they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these pieces can be permitted to assume that title" (Smith, p. 1). A few lines further down, he adds : "It will perhaps appear to them (readers of superior judgment, disapproving of the style of his poems) that in wishing to avoid the prevalent faults of the day, the author has sometimes descended too low, and that many of his expressions are too familiar and not of sufficient dignity."

The hostile indictment against Wordsworth could not have been fuller or more strongly worded : even Jeffrey might have subscribed to its substance, though he would, in all probability, have liked to make the tone a bit more pungent. The sentences quoted above are a conclusive proof that Wordsworth was under no illusions as to the charges against him, and anticipates them with absolute fullness and exhaustiveness. But when we turn to the answers against these self-made charges formulated with such admirable clearness, we are disappointed at their formal and superficial character. Perhaps the idea of writing a full-length Preface expounding his own principles of poetry did not yet take shape in Wordsworth's mind, and he contents himself with a general warning to his critics against indulging in rashness of judgment and falling victims to their "pre-established codes of decision", their previously formed and deeply rooted notion as to the meaning and functions of poetry. The only arguments that he offers, over and above these general dissuasives, are :

- (1) that his pieces should be allowed to have the title of poetry, if they are found to contain a natural delineation of human passions, characters and incidents : and
- (2) as an answer to the charge of lowness of style, he pleads that an acquaintance with "our elder writers and with those in modern times who have been the most



successful in painting manners and passions" will tend to mitigate the complaint against him on this head. A little analysis of these arguments is, however, sufficient to prove their inadequacy. A natural delineation of human characters, passions and incidents relates more to the subject-matter of poetry than to its style ; moreover, it is a trait common to poetry and prose alike, being in short the minimum qualification that any writing must possess before it can aspire to the rank of literature. A just and true portraiture of human nature is no excuse for the lack of the subtler graces and virtues that distinctively belong to poetry : and then, it must possess sufficient reality and incisiveness, complexity and psychological interest, if we are to accept it as a substitute for poetic graces. Crabbe and Browning are the only two poets in whose cases the substitute is somewhat grudgingly accepted; but the excuse is not certainly available in Wordsworth's poetry, where it is but the ordinary, elementary traits of human nature, and not their surprising turns and unexpected developments that are selected for treatment.

It is possible to plead that Wordsworth offers a just delineation of human nature as an alternative qualification for poetry in place of that "gaudiness and inane phraseology" which seemed to constitute the only claim for that title in the case of so many contemporary writings, and not as a substitute for the more vital and essential qualities which might very well be combined with that natural delineation. But if that is so, then why all this curious talk about "strangeness," and "awkwardness" ? Surely the just portraiture of human passions in poetry is not so unusual and novel a thing as to excite these feelings of strangeness and awkwardness in the reader. These feelings are due to the delineation being attempted in a low, creeping diction which the reader has never seen associated with poetry. The real question is whether the justest of delineations can excuse and atone for such a style ; and this question



Wordsworth has evaded. He has thus offered excellence in one kind as an apology for lapse of a different kind, unless, of course, the naturalness of delineation be interpreted in a wider sense, and made to stand for the total effect, so as to involve and presuppose the use of the right kind of style in the description.

That the lowness and want of dignity in the expression is the real cause of the perplexity of the reader is proved beyond doubt by the next admission of the poet a few sentences further down. "In wishing to avoid the prevalent fault of the day, the author has sometimes descended too low, and many of his expressions are too familiar and not of sufficient dignity." To this the poet does not give a reasoned reply, but refers to precedents in our "elder writers" and those among modern writers who have been most successful in painting manners and passions, in vindication of his own style. It is difficult from this vague description to identify the authors, either ancient or modern, who furnish Wordsworth with parallels for his style in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Possibly Chaucer is to be included among the "elder writers," as he is referred to by Wordsworth in the Preface of 1800 (Smith, p. 15, footnote) as well as later mentioned by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* as an example of the neutral style in poetry. But it would be a veritable puzzle to find out the modern painters of manners and passions who supplied Wordsworth with precedents for the use of low style, and must therefore have indirectly inspired him with the idea of the famous experiment of using "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society" (this is his expression in the Advertisement of 1798) for the purposes of poetry. The reference to "manners and passions" seems to point to the eighteenth-century novelists, headed by Richardson and Fielding; but it is rather strange that Wordsworth should have fixed upon any of the eighteenth-century tribe as furnishing him with examples of his most daring and original experiment



in language. There is no doubt that Richardson and Fielding derive their most realistic effects from the racy and idiomatic use of colloquial language, especially in the mouths of low-class, humble people, but this is not the kind of impression that Wordsworth's style in the *Lyrical Ballads* tends to convey, nor is this kind of realistic effect specially within the province of poetry, or one which poets should specially aim it. What appears as charming and piquant in the leisurely atmosphere of a novel and through the medium of prose seems but a tedious spinning out of commonplaces within the bonds of metre, and in the more heightened sphere of poetry. In short, Wordsworth's attempt to shelter himself under the authority of the eighteenth-century novelists—if they at all are meant—seems to be rather futile and ill-conceived, and based upon a misconception as to the relative functions and methods of poetry and the novel.

In the Preface to the Second Edition (1800) Wordsworth considerably enlarges the scope of his defence, and takes us down to vital principles on which to justify his practice. He is satisfied with the reception given to the First Edition ; for though there has been no lack of hostile criticism, no dearth of that feeling of "strangeness and awkwardness" which he apprehended, yet he has been able to please a larger number of readers than he had hoped to do. He grows bolder, and claims positive merits for his poems which he had but vaguely hinted at in the Advertisement. His friends have urged him to attempt a reasoned and philosophical defence of his poetry, since it is based upon a new quality of moral feelings and relations which is expected to prove of permanent value to mankind ; although he is conscious that such a defence would prove inadequate, unless he takes cognizance of wider issues that lie beyond the province of literature proper, though exercising a vital influence upon it : questions, namely, of the influence of associations, and the subtle changes of taste from age to age, and the



health and morbid elements intermingled in our taste for poetry ; questions, in short, which are more social than literary.

He poines that much of the censure against his poems rests on unreasonable expectations or prepossessions in the reader's mind raised by the very act of writing in verse, and asserts that his poems are written to combat these very prepossessions. He justifies his choice of incidents from rustic life, as well as the approximation to rustic language in his poetry ; but here his apology is elevated into a note of impassioned glorification of his own choice, his tone being that of a man who has discovered a new veiu of poetry richer and more fruitful than the one traditionally worked upon, rather than that of one who is timidly praying for a hearing in irespect of a novel and somewhat doubtful experiment. He is aware of the but too well-founded charge of triviality of thought and meanness of expression against some kinds of contemporary poetry—he is possibly alluding to the ballad revivals rendered popular and fashionable by editors like Percy ; but this is more a matter of discredit for the writers than the source of an evil influence for poetry itself. His own poems are raised above the level of this kind of poetry, to which it may have an apparent resemblance in respect of lowness of style, in being inspired by a worthy purpose and a depth of thought and feeling which has become habitual with him, thus serving to chasten and purify the heart of the reader.

He illustrates the existence of this worthy purpose from many of his poems, but this portion, though retained in the Preface of 1802, is finally dropped from the Preface of 1815, which represents the final version of Wordsworth's critical views on the point. Possibly this excision may be due to the poet's consciousness that an undue stress on the element of purpose in his poems may tend to create a wrong impression as to their purely poetic quality. He further adds, as another ground of justification, that in his poems "it is the feeling that gives importance to the subject,



and not the subject to the feeling". Then he bewails the fact that the readers of the present age can be moved by gross and violent stimulants alone. It is part of Wordsworth's aim in the writing of his poems to counteract this depravity of taste, and to provide a purer thrill of excitement drawn from the simple, everyday incidents of common life ; and his innate faith in the dignity and nobility of the human mind as well as in the sanative, restorative power of external nature saves him from a despondent view with respect to the future.

Next, he gives us a more explicit statement of some of the chief points in which the *style* of his poems will be found to differ from that of contemporary poetry :

(1) He has discarded *personifications of abstract ideas*, except in the representation of rare moments of passion—and this in keeping with his proclaimed resolve to adopt the very language of men. Here the poet exemplifies a rather unusual moderation and fairmindedness, which, however, he can hardly maintain throughout, in speaking of his method as only one of many possible alternatives, and not claiming an exclusive merit or positive superiority on its behalf.

(2) The same reason of conformity to the real language of men has likewise led him to reject *poetic diction*, meaning by it a set of expressions exclusively appropriated to poetry by the practice of the eighteenth-century poets.

(3) His style bears upon it the mark of being written with a steady eye upon the subject, and is absolutely free from any falsehood of description.

(4) It is also marked by an adaptation of language to idea, according to the degree of its importance. This last appears, on the face of it, to be an untenable claim, for surely if the language had been as exquisitely fitted to the importance of the idea as the poet represents it to be, it would not have excited that feeling of strangeness and awkwardness in the reader which



Wordsworth himself apprehends as the likely effect of his innovations.

(5) Lastly, he has rejected many beautiful expressions which have been debased and vulgarized by the unworthy associations which have too thickly clustered round them owing to their frequent use by bad poets. Wordsworth has not given us any examples of these words whose native beauty has been overridden by their acquired evil associations, and in the absence of examples, it is idle to speculate as to his real meaning.

It is at this stage that Wordsworth ceases to talk of his own poems alone, and soars into universal considerations on the kind of language suitable for poetry in general. As this has but an indirect bearing on the question of the lapses and shortcomings in his own poetry, and as it has been already exhaustively treated in another connection, there is no need to traverse the same ground over again. Wordsworth tries to convince the reader, by a reference to the first principles of poetry, that his so-called defects are no defects at all, but positive merits ; that if his language is prosaic, it is quite equal to the needs of the very best poetry ; that if metre demands a more heightened style, this is supplied by the operation of the principle of selection ; that, in short, the whole blame attaches to the perverse tastes and unreasonable expectations of the readers, and that his own practice has really supplied a wholesome and much-needed corrective to the contemporary depravity of public taste.

Wordsworth concludes his Preface with an apologetic admission of some extravagances into which he might have been pushed by his theory. He has already, in an earlier part of the Preface, admitted that a preference for triviality of thought and meanness of expression is discreditable for the poet, though not so pernicious in its effects on poetry as a weakness for gaudy and pompous diction. He now admits another vital weakness in his method—his occasional tendency to lay a disproportionate



stress on unworthy subjects, which had come to assume a factitious importance in the poet's own imagination for reasons personal to himself, and not accorded to it by general assent. Thus to Wordsworth must be given the credit for having anticipated, with remarkable clear-sightedness, the dominant note in the strain of hostile criticism which has been levelled against him ever since his manifestos were ushered forth into the world. This really constitutes the weakest link in Wordsworth's armour, and the main reason of his perversions in actual practice.

Not that we are prepared to assert the antecedent impossibility of any subject being treated with sufficient depth of feeling or intensity of imaginative power : Wordsworth's own achievements have made us wiser on this head. But we feel, in the case of some at least of the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, that they are based upon subjects which were chosen rather under the obsession of a particular theory than because they evoked deep feelings in the poet himself. After all, every choice is justified by the treatment which it leads up to ; and we must admit that in not a few of the poems such a justification is wanting. It is precisely in the case of these poems, where the bare nakedness of the subject-matter is untransformed by the poetic imagination, and its latent promise remains unredeemed, that Wordsworth falls a victim to that triviality of thought and meanness of expression which he has recognized as so highly discreditable to the character of the poet, and sinks even below the level of the very worst sort of ballad-poetry. In justice to Wordsworth it must be said that he is fully aware of the enormity of the offence in such cases : no hostile criticism could surpass the frank adequacy of his self-condemnation : "I am sensible that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general, and that, consequently, giving to things a false importance, sometimes from *diseased* impulses, I may have written upon unworthy subjects" (Smith, p. 36). Our regret is increased all the more as we ask the question as to why,



with such admirable power of self-criticism, the poet did not observe more caution in his actual choice of subjects ; why, with the possibility of such a danger present in his mind, he did not exercise a juster discrimination between genuine springs of emotion and false.

But Wordsworth is too much of an innovator to be entirely just. While admitting his own weakness in having ascribed undue importance to trivial subjects, he lays a good share of the blame at the door of the reader also. The latter is at the mercy of his old, inveterate associations, and words and situations evoking tenderness and pathos in the poet merely arouse the sense of the ludicrous in him. Wordsworth has dwelt on this point at length in his letter to Wilson (Smith, p. 3), but after a careful balancing of both sides of the case, it appears that Wordsworth has overstated his charge against his readers. Certainly the only poem in which he can legitimately claim to have been the victim of these deep-rooted associations of words in the reader's mind is *The Idiot Boy*. But in the case of the other poems which produce the impression of futility, though there may be a preexisting prejudice with which the reader starts, yet on the whole his mind is in a neutral state, waiting to be overcome by the imaginative power of the poet ; and if he is not overcome, it is not so much because of the obduracy of his own prepossessions as because of the lack of imaginative vitality in the poet. Wordsworth, however, is perfectly right in asserting the value of independent judgment in a poet, his sturdy reliance on his own feelings, no matter whether they are endorsed by the reader or not. For the sources of strength and weakness are strangely blended in him ; and a habitual deference to the judgment of the reader against the promptings of his own feelings would so completely sap the vitality of his poetic powers as to rob his poems of all elements of real originality and value.

Wordsworth now adverts to yet another device re-



sorted to by hostile critics for pouring contempt and ridicule on language closely resembling that of life and nature. They select the worst specimens of such language used in the treatment of low and contemptible subjects which are not merely incapable of emotional treatment but wanting even in sense. Wordsworth rightly resents the efforts to damn his theories on such grounds, and urges that such a thing as Dr. Johnson's parody of a ballad-stanza can hardly be taken as a fair specimen of the language he recommends. But to say this is not to dispose of the question. The tables may certainly be turned on Wordsworth by asking him as to why the use of "language closely resembling that of life and nature" leads to such awkward and unfortunate effects in some of his own poems where the subject-matter was looked upon by himself as tender and pathetic, and not certainly "as a fair example of the superlatively contemptible". Johnson's parody is not a serious poem, and did not originate in any serious poetic mood; and as such it cannot be taken as an illustration either in favour of or against any particular theory of poetic diction. But the same thing cannot be said of Wordsworth's own poems written with a worthy purpose and as a deliberate illustration of his own special theory. If poems like *Goody Blake and Harry Gill* or *The Last of the Flock* or *The Sailor's Mother* fail, they fail either because of the inadequacy of the theory they seek to illustrate, or because they do not carry out what they profess to do, and do not observe the safeguards and limitations under which alone language resembling the actual speech of men can be fruitfully used in poetry; or still further because the process of selection, on which Wordsworth tends to lay an increasingly greater stress as he draws towards the end of the Preface, has been but imperfectly carried out. In any case, it is the enunciator of the theory who is to blame—if not for the positive unsoundness or inadequacy of his theory, at any rate for his neglect of the conditions



under which alone it can be successfully worked out.

There is one point which deserves notice in this argument of Wordsworth. In speaking of Johnson's parody as well as a stanza quoted from a real ballad—*Babes in the Wood*—Wordsworth makes a very interesting remark on their language : "In both these stanzas *the words* and *the order of the words* in no respect differ from the most unimpassioned conversation." From this remark it is apparent that Wordsworth has not been able to get rid of the old confusion between vocabulary and arrangement of the words ; and this element of ambiguity makes it very difficult for us both to make a precise assessment of the value of his theory, as also to indicate the extent of his responsibility in adhering to or deviating from it. It has already been suggested that much of the difficulty of Wordsworth's position lay in his attempt to combine two separate things in his theory : in his insistence on the identity of the language of prose and poetry, he must have been thinking of the words only ; in his aim to approximate the language of his poems to the actual speech of men, he was driven to observe the prose order of the words as well, as best as he could—and his occasional failure to observe this order, taken along with his lack of real inspiration, not only lands him in grotesque absurdities, but also tends to shake the whole foundations of his theory. If Wordsworth had been more precise in his use of language, it is difficult to say whether he would have been able to save himself from disgrace in every instance ; but it is quite certain that his theory would have fared much better, and would possibly have been placed on a surer and more unassailable basis. As things now stand, we carp at the poet all the more for not knowing exactly what he aimed at ; and his very ambiguity makes him the target of a greater volume of hostile criticism than would otherwise have fallen to his lot.

Wordsworth then asks the readers to judge his poems on the basis of their independent feelings, and not be car-





Wordsworth concludes his long Preface with an assertion that he knows it will be difficult for him to win his readers over to his ways of thinking, as poetry of the traditional type has been a source of pleasure to them and has thus enlisted their deepest feelings on its behalf. Still he maintains that his own poetry is calculated to produce a purer and more permanent pleasure and that its proper appreciation would involve a more or less complete abandonment of the old tastes and judgments concerning poetry. This remark has a vital bearing, if only on the question of his modesty ; for his apologists have represented his attitude as a modest claim to get a fair and patient hearing for his own poems rather than as an audacious assertion of their intrinsic superiority to the kinds of poetry hitherto prevalent. The present passage tends to throw a good deal of doubt on that supposition and indeed it is quite natural on the part of an original genius to entertain an honest conviction about the superiority of the new line he has opened up ; any revolutionary departure from past and accepted models becomes otherwise an impossibility. One can quite understand this faith of Wordsworth in the light of a revolt against the formal and unimaginative poetry of his immediate pre-



decessors. And though such an attitude may seem to involve a non-appreciation of the poets of an earlier epoch, of the glorious poetry of Shakespeare and Milton, and though Wordsworth himself in his later years tended to incline more and more to this traditional type, yet it must be admitted that on the whole he has put forward a just claim on behalf of his early poems, a claim endorsed and justified by time. For it is but the barest truth to assert that since the days of Wordsworth poetry has moved on other hinges, and flowed along channels different from those of the past.





PART II  
POETIC PRACTICE



## 1 Introductory

THE most important part of Wordsworth's Preface is that in which he sets forth his reasons for the choice of rustic subjects and rustic language. These reasons are sufficiently well known, being in fact repeated in every literary handbook that deals with the subject ; but the general tendency is to take them in a lump, as somewhat vague and indefinite panegyrics of rustic life, not intended for a literal and precise application. Our ideas on the question will gain very much in point of clearness and precision if we examine the grounds a little more thoroughly, and also seek to determine how far they have been actually illustrated in the poems constituting the *Lyrical Ballads*.

The main reasons which Wordsworth advances to justify his choice of rustic themes can be arranged under the following heads :

- (1) The essential passions of the human heart find, in rustic life, a soil in which they can attain their maturity and a more emphatic and unrestrained expression.
- (2) The elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity.
- (3) The manners of rural life, germinating as they do from these elementary feelings, are less complex, and accordingly more durable and intelligible.
- (4) In rural life, the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

We shall pay but a poor tribute to Wordsworth, and fail to give him proper credit for a precise and measured use of language, if we jumble up these different points and interpret them, in their cumulative effects, as a mere panegyric and glorification of rustic life. Let us consider each of these points separately, though some of them are



not quite free from traces of obscurity and confusion as to the precise scope of their meaning. Is it possible, for example, to draw any line of distinction between the "essential passions" of (1) and the "elementary feelings" of (2)? Wordsworth himself furnishes some vague hints and clues to the distinction which he might possibly have in his mind, and it is for us to put these hints together and draw them out into a clearer outline. Possibly by "elementary" he refers to the simpler and less impassioned feelings, feelings that are marked more by an odd *naïveté* than by intensity. A clearer light is thrown on this distinction by the illustrations put forward by the poet. Such poems as *The Old Man Travelling*, *The Two Thieves*, as well as the *Matthew Poems*, are put forward in the Preface of 1802 as illustrations of "less impassioned feelings", (see Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, edited by Sampson, p. 240, for the omitted portion in which this distinction occurs), and these poems he describes as "attempts to sketch characters under the influence of less impassioned feelings, characters of which the elements are simple, *belonging rather to nature than to manners*, such as exist now, and will probably always exist, and which from their very constitution may be distinctly and profitably contemplated". This is putting the distinction clearly enough. In such a poem as *The Two Thieves*, the poet is dealing with a curious, rather than an essential trait of character—an inveterate tendency contracted by an old man to steal trifles, and imbibed from him by his infant grandson. This is what the poet means by "elementary feelings"—feelings low-pitched, eccentric, and psychologically interesting rather than the deep and poignant emotions which are spoken of as "essential". With this distinction fixed up in our mind, let us turn to examine how far each one of these objects has been carried out in the poems dealing with rustic life, and how far the language in them really approximates to rustic speech.



## II Poems dealing with "essential passions"

LET us now try to distinguish the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* which may be said to come under group (i) as dealing with the "essential passions" of the human heart. This group will include :

(1) *The Mad Mother* ; (2) *The Forsaken Indian Woman* ; (3) *The Thorn* ; (4) *Goody Blake and Harry Gill* ; (5) *The Last of the Flock* ; (6) *The Idiot Boy* ; (7) *The Brothers* ; and (8) *Michael*. In each one of these poems the poet tries to deal with some intense emotion or other, the basic feelings of the human heart, and show by their energy and vividness the keen unblunted edge of the imagination that works upon them, as well as by their spontaneous emanation from common incidents of rustic life, that such life is peculiarly rich in these kinds of emotional effects, that "these humble children of the furrow", as Pater puts it, constitute "the true aristocracy of passionate souls". Of course, in the case of many of these poems such effects are more aimed at than attained, and Wordsworth is too deeply obsessed by his new theory to be always able to distinguish aright between the intention and the achievement. The impression of passion is spoilt, sometimes through diffuseness and long-windedness in narrative, sometimes through an injudicious choice of subject which is more ridiculous than passionate, and generally through the feebleness of the poet's imaginative apprehension of even promising situations.

*The Mad Mother* and *The Forsaken Indian Woman* are undoubtedly the two poems in which an essential passion finds a most intense expression, and, emanating as it does from the special conditions of rustic life, has a refreshing keenness and unconventionality about it. But in the case of both, it is not the normal incidents of rustic life that are the source of passion, but some abnormal or extraordinary feature that is not peculiar to rustic life alone. It is the madness of the speaker in *The Mad Mother*, and



the element of exoticism in *The Forsaken Indian Woman*, with its peculiar customs and superstitions and its fresh and unconventional way of looking at things, that is responsible for many of the most telling and vivid touches in them, and for the general impression of passionate intensity that they leave behind. It would be unfair to claim this note of passion as a normal feature of rustic feelings, since the circumstances in both the cases are so extraordinary. Madness is not a special feature of rustic life, and the intensity achieved by a forceful representation of such an abnormal passion cannot obviously be laid down to the credit of such life. Similarly, the exotic touches in *The Forsaken Indian Woman*, though they aid powerfully towards the impression of passionate wildness, detract considerably from the claim put forward by Wordsworth on behalf of normal rustic life as a better soil for the growth of essential feelings. Wordsworth is undoubtedly entitled to full credit on account of the rare aptness and skill with which he interweaves the images and ideas of rustic life with the development of the passion, and thus imparts an ineffacably rustic and homely tinge to the whole atmosphere.

The madness of *The Mad Mother* winds and meanders through channels in which rustic thoughts usually tend to flow, and her morbid imagination sheds its lurid light on images and situations familiar to the rustic mind ; and thus, while losing nothing in point of intensity, it creates an almost new type which is different from the orthodox representation of the passion in high life, e.g. in the case of *King Lear*. A similar veracity and closeness to rustic life, albeit of a different kind from the life of Cumbrian dalesmen with which Wordsworth was personally familiar, marks the fluxes and refluxes of feeling, the quick alternations between hope and despair, which are so vividly and forcibly brought out in *The Forsaken Indian Woman*. So that in the case of these two poems we are forced to conclude that Wordsworth has achieved a magnificent success, in that he has actually demonstrated

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the passionate intensity of rustic life, though he does not succeed in removing our doubts about the soundness of his general theory ; for we are more disposed to ascribe this success to the poet's fortunate discovery of a passionate vein in some abnormal aspects of homely life rather than to any inherent superiority of rustic life itself, based on its richer endowment of essential feelings.

In turning next to the language of these poems, we are forced to concede that these are real instances of selection from the language of rustic life or the actual speech of men. The conversational accent is maintained throughout, and the words and ideas have been studiously kept within the limits of a rustic mind ; and yet they are caught up and marshalled by an imagination working at white heat, and evoking the highest effect out of such simple materials. These two poems thus furnish wonderful illustrations as to the possibilities of simple speech, when the subject is passionate enough, and the imagination rightly stirred : and we regret that Wordsworth did not add to the number of such illustrations for placing his theory on an unassailable footing.

These poems, as well as most of the others in the *Lyrical Ballads* tend to throw light also on another vexed point in Wordsworth's theory—viz. whether he aimed at conforming not merely to the words of prose, but also to the prose order in his own poetic diction. We have referred already to the antecedent impossibility of a poet's tying himself with such rigorous bonds and spurning all the privileges so willingly conceded to him, when he has to satisfy the requirements of metre and rhyme. The poet's actual practice in the *Lyrical Ballads* goes to show that though in many cases the prose words brought with them the prose order, yet he does not erect this latter into a vital article of creed, but permits to himself deviations whenever such deviations are rendered necessary by the conditions of his craft. The following lines selected at random from the two poems under



consideration will throw light on the latitude which Wordsworth permitted to himself in the matter of conformity to the arrangement of prose. "But they to me no joy can give" (*Forsaken Indian Woman*, St. 2); "For strong and without pain I lay" (St. 3); "When from my arms my babe they took" (St. 4); "My last thoughts would happy be" (St. 7); "She talked and sung the woods among" (*The Mad Mother*, St. 1); "If his sweet babe he could forsake" (St. 8). At the same time it must be admitted that these are but instances of a very slight departure from the order of prose, and do not involve any violent or unusual inversion; nor do they disturb the impression of approximation to actual speech, which is the great ideal to be always kept in view.

*The Mad Mother* and *The Forsaken Indian Woman* naturally suggest a comparison with another poem of Wordsworth of a somewhat later date—*The Affliction of Margaret*. This is a poem dealing essentially with the same order of emotion—the poignant grief of a mother at her desertion by her son. The incident is quite a normal feature of life, and has nothing of the strangeness and abnormality that mark the situations of the two poems now under consideration. Nor has it any specifically rustic tinge about it, being something that is common to all life, except that it is put into the mouth of a rustic woman and is democratic in its tone and general outlook on life. Nor, again, is it written under the obsession of any particular theory, with any restrictions upon the genuine imaginative inspiration inherent in the subject itself, and guided in its choice of language by anything more formal than instinctive poetic taste. It therefore constitutes a fair example of the treatment Wordsworth would have accorded to the passionate incidents of rustic life, if there had been no theory to deflect the natural current of his imagination, and to mislead him as to the real emotional value of the subject of his choice. A comparison would thus be found to be very instructive as



bringing out the exact influence of his theory in determining the imaginative quality of his poems: and the comparison establishes the definite superiority of the later poem.

*The Affliction of Margaret* strikes a deeper emotional vein, and is utterly free from that melodramatic tinge of over-excitement which colours the pathos of the earlier poems. It rises to a more sustained poignancy of passion, the intensity of its pathos being quite on a par with the purity of the means employed. The thoughts flow on in an ever-widening sweep, from depths to greater depths, and have nothing of the sudden jerks and abrupt transitions which serve to keep up the interest and satisfy the claims of psychology in the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads*. The style ranges from high to low, from the impassioned and resonant to the tense and naked with an unfailing and instinctive sureness that bespeaks the infallibility of imaginative inspiration at its highest. There are stanzas that ring out, like that beginning with "Perhaps some dungeon hears thee groan", and others that speak in a soft, subdued whisper, "My apprehensions come in crowds"; and the style in all its levels and varieties is felt to be an appropriate embodiment of the feeling. The poem as a whole leaves an impression of greater maturity and depth, a more rounded perfection and intimate fusion between style and emotion; and its passion is made to well out of the constant central core of the human heart, and not luckily extracted out of its outlying frontiers and collateral picturesqueness.

The other poems dealing with "essential passions" may be more briefly treated. There are poems like *Goody Blake and Harry Gill* and *The Last of the Flock*, and *The Sailor's Mother* written at a later date (1802), which all may be taken to deal with essential feelings, and aim at producing an impression of passion and pathos. But the aim, unfortunately, is not realized in actual practice; the poet's imagination has not been rightly or deeply



stirred, and the reader is therefore left cold and untouched. *Goody Blake* is conceived as a tale of passion—the story of a curse realizing itself in the life of its victim, a motive put to such magnificent poetic use in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*: but it is too limpingly told to attain the effect of intensity aimed at. Similarly, *The Last of the Flock* is meant to be a passionate incident taken from rustic life—a shepherd's deep attachment to his flock, and the pang that he feels at its thinning down through disease. But it remains a tale of passion unrealized. However deeply Wordsworth might have personally felt the pathos of the situation, he fails to communicate it to the reader; and in spite of the occasional introduction of passionate lines, such as

It was a vein that never stopp'd,  
Like blood-drops from my heart they dropp'd,

or—

To wicked deeds I was inclined,  
And wicked fancies cross'd my mind—

the general effect is tame enough, and the subject is not raised above the commonplace. *The Sailor's Mother* (1802), likewise, deals with a pathetic situation in a singularly matter-of-fact, unimaginative manner, and the impression of pathos, if any is intended to be conveyed, is absolutely lost upon the reader. One stanza of this poem is quoted by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* as an example of the inconsequence and discursiveness of real rustic speech and of its consequent unfitness for the higher purposes of poetry.

The bird and cage they both were his :  
'Twas my son's bird ; and neat and trim  
He kept it ; many voyages  
The singing-bird had gone with him ;  
When last he sailed, he left the bird behind ;  
From bodings, as might be, that hung upon his mind.

It is poems like these which have thrown the greatest discredit both on Wordsworth's choice of rustic subjects



and his use of rustic speech. They tend to falsify the immense claims he makes on behalf of rustic life as regards its special richness in passionate incidents and situations. We think naturally enough that we would have to revise our ideas as to what is passionate if such a title is claimed for the subject-matter of the above poems. Rustic life may, no doubt, have a larger share of pathos than can be found among the higher ranks—and this on the quite natural ground that struggles and privations and mishaps figure, on the whole, more prominently in it. Wordsworth's mistake lay in supposing, rather too hastily, that every such instance of pathos would be fit for imaginative treatment, that every petty mischance and trivial loss of rustic life would affect us as profoundly as they no doubt affected the poet himself. Of course, as Professor Bradley has so ably contended, to the rustics themselves these losses were of as much moment as the loss of their crowns to kings like Richard II and Richard III; but the reader can hardly be expected to attach the same value to them as the sufferers themselves, unless the poignancy of their emotions is fully brought out in the actual treatment of the poet. The poet's imagination must therefore transcend the apparent triviality of the subject by revealing its hidden emotional wealth; and Wordsworth's over-solemn asseverations in praise of rustic life are thus based on a misconception that in poetry all that appears passionate to his own mind would inevitably have the same kind and quality of appeal to the reader's, however meagre and imperfect the treatment may be, and even though no steps are taken to bridge over the gulf separating the reader's mind from that of the poet.

Of course, judged from Wordsworth's own standpoint, the case is not really so simple as that. To Wordsworth's own mind, the main reason of the ill-success of many of his poems was the imperfect and even depraved constitution of the reader's mind—a mind overridden by long-standing prejudices and inveterate associations. If the



reader's mind does not catch fire as quickly as the poet's, it is because of its being a heavy, lumpish mass encrusted with wrong notions and false tastes, through which the sparks of inspiration make their progress only with great difficulty. Wordsworth has this in common with all reformers, that in the impatience of his idealism he makes rather heavy demand upon frail human nature, expecting from it a degree of purity and perfection that is unwarranted by actual experience of life. The degree of unreasonableness in this demand has been somewhat *naively* and unconsciously brought out in the famous lines in *Simon Lee*, another poem of the *Lyrical Ballads* :

O reader ! had you in your mind  
Such stores as silent thought can bring,  
O gentle reader ! you would find  
A tale in everything.

Wordsworth, in his innocence, expects as a matter of course that every reader, if he is not actually a poet so as to cap verses with himself, must have in him the essential poetic stuff—the fullness of poetic sensibility to things common and trivial, the power to be affected deeply by a bare incident without any help from the poetic interpretation of the incident, and he naturally complains if these expectations are not realized. There may be an element of truth in these complaints, no doubt ; and the eighteenth-century reader must have brought to bear upon his appreciation of poems dealing with low, humble life a degree of possibly superfluous perversity and wrong-headedness that most certainly added to the difficulty of the poet's task. But thanks to the efforts of Wordsworth himself, we, the readers of the present generation, may claim to stand on a better footing ; we certainly do not begin a poem on rustic life with an antecedent prejudice or distrust. Our mood is rather the very reverse of this ; in the excess of our reaction from the eighteenth-century mood, we are rather too ready to discover mystic import and emotional fervour in the



humblest incidents, to find "eternity in a grain of sand". But in the case of poems like this we feel a sense of disappointment, in spite of all our prepossessions in their favour, specially when we contrast them with others which Wordsworth's genius has succeeded in transforming. Hence it seems not quite unfair to conclude that Wordsworth's failure in these cases is due not so much to any prejudice or want of equipment on the reader's part as to his inability to bring out the latent promise in his subjects; and in spite of his proclamation as to the abundance of passionate situations in rustic life, he has not been able to give us many concrete examples of such incidents, most of his poems being passionate rather in intention than in effect.

The language, too, of these poems hardly justifies the very high encomiums that Wordsworth bestows upon rustic speech. It does not seem to have gained much by constant communion with the best objects of nature, and does not certainly attain to the dignity of "a permanent and philosophical language". It may no doubt be urged that the language was not "selected" enough, and the failure may be attributed to this inadequacy of the process of selection. But if that were so, it is none the less the fault of the poet, who, before he made use of it, must have been satisfied as to its purification from the defects inherent in rustic speech and its fitness for the purposes of poetry. The conversational accent and lightness of touch are, no doubt, maintained throughout; as we read the poems we hear as it were the speech of a rustic with the fewest possible changes and modifications. But nowhere is this easy winding sort of language lifted into that of high passion. The language, winding away as it does so light-heartedly and with so little thought about prolixity, seems to stand in the way of a firmer imaginative grip of the subject, of a concentrated presentation of passion. And to what ridiculous devices does Wordsworth stoop in order to keep up this conversational



accent: in every third or fourth line he has to stuff the sentence with a meaningless expletive, which becomes exasperating in its frequent iteration. "The neighbours tell and tell you truly," "You would have said, if you had met her," "As every man who knew her says," "And all who see him say 'tis plain"—expressions like these tend to become a regular feature of his style.

A faint flush of passion colours a few of these conversational passages, e.g.—

The cold, cold moon above her head,  
Thus on her knees did Goody pray ;  
Young Harry heard what she had said,  
And icy-cold he turned away—

*Goody Blake and Harry Gill, St. 13.*

and there is a more conscious interweaving of a passionate note in *The Last of the Flock*, where the loss of the farmer is sought to be allied with his deeper feelings, such as his love for his children. But the final impression in both these cases is that of the rudiments of passion, a feeble and embryonic sort of excitement, rather than the perfect artistic rendering thereof. The poems are not certainly lacking in a certain simple grace and lightness of touch, refreshing all the more by reason of the contrast with the ponderosities and abstractions of eighteenth-century poetry, and their simplicity is just spiced with a dash and suggestion of passion. We can quite willingly allow a place to these poems somewhere near the lower grassy slopes of Parnassus, but we cannot follow Wordsworth in assigning them to its topmost peaks, and discover in them the most mature and emphatic expression of essential passions.

The only other poem belonging to this group that yet remains to be considered is *The Thorn*. Here the case is more complex, both because the passion sought to be represented is of a wilder and more abnormal character, being shot through with supernatural suggestions, and



also because the narrator is not the poet himself, but a garrulous old sailor whose peculiarities are supposed to be reflected in the style of the poem. So far as the second point is concerned, it is not of much practical moment ; for the long-windedness and garrulity of this poem has nothing peculiar about it, and is quite gratuitously transferred to the old sailor, whose very existence we do not suspect at all in the course of the poem. The dramatic device only served to give Wordsworth a bolder licence in this respect; he expatiates with quite an easy conscience, confident that the sin can be laid at the door of somebody else. But the first point has important practical consequences: the very fact that the poet here seeks to deal with a wilder, a more lurid passion imposes a heavier burden upon his language, and taxes its resources to a still greater extent.

The question is : does Wordsworth's language come triumphantly out of this ordeal ; does it prove its fitness to deal not merely with such low-pitched subdued feelings as are embodied in *The Last of the Flock*, or *Goody Blake*, but with more lurid and abnormal passions ? And the answer is hardly unanimous ; there are critics who see in the poem a triumphant vindication of Wordsworth's theory and practice, and who are unable to put away the wild ring of the forlorn cry out of their heads. For others the impression is somewhat different : the contrast with any of the fine supernatural poems of Coleridge, or even with such a second-rate poem as the *Three Graves*, will expose quite clearly the crudity of the methods used by Wordsworth in weaving in the supernatural suggestions. And though the poet has here indeed made a right choice of subject, has really selected a passionate incident from rustic life, he is not enough of a dramatist to tell the story effectively through the speech of a garrulous old man, and the garrulity and long-windedness of the speaker, whether he is the poet himself or an imaginary narrator, do certainly tend to destroy the impression of passion. The passionate elements have



not been sufficiently fused together, so as to lead up to an impression of impassioned intensity.

We can thus scarcely endorse the claim of Wordsworth that rustic life presents, on the whole, a better soil for essential passions, and that rustic speech provides the best instrument for their poetic expression. We have seen the part that Wordsworth's mystical faith in rustic life plays in inducing in him a mood of carelessness as to the selection of really stirring and passionate incidents. The wave of his mysticism bears him safely over the ruts and hollows of his subject-matter ; but the reader, who is lacking in the mystical temperament of the poet, feels himself hopelessly involved and entangled. Indeed, Crabbe had a surer eye for the discovery of the tragic and passionate veins in rustic life; he was always on the quest after interesting situations in the life of homely people, and he did find an abundant crop of such situations, though with him the centre of interest did not lie so much in essential passions as in psychological conflicts and complexity of moods. Crabbe is lacking in Wordsworth's mystic faith and tendency to idealization ; and his portraits impress us differently from those of Wordsworth. But such is his grasp of details, such his unerring insight into dramatic episodes and conflicts in the life of the poor, that we cannot but wish that Wordsworth's powers of idealization might have been turned on the rich variety of materials which Crabbe so patiently put together, instead of being wasted on bare, naked, unpromising subjects that defied his attempts at imaginative uplifting. In the matter of language, too, Crabbe, while keeping close to the actual speech of humble folk, reached a more satisfactory style, a style more in harmony with the subject-matter and more befitting its ranges and moods of feeling.

As for *The Brothers* and *Michael*, they deal not so much with a single situation as with the whole tenor of life, and may be more fitly dealt with in connection with the fourth group.



### III Poems dealing with "elementary feelings"

WE may now pass on to the second group, in which the poet's main object is to isolate elementary feelings from the complex web of life, and show them existing in a state of greater simplicity among rustic people. The most striking and original pieces in this group are, beyond doubt, the *Matthew* poems, and had it not been for Wordsworth's own statement which assigns to them a comparatively inferior position as dealing with less impassioned feelings, and classifies them along with such poems as *The Old Man Travelling* and *The Two Thieves*, (Preface of 1802), we would rather find for them a place in the first group. In these poems there has been an attempt at delineating a new type of character from rustic life, eccentric, marked by quick changefulness of mood, a subtle blend of the serious and the gay, and penetrating, by reason of its very unconventionality, to depths of thought and truths about human life beyond the reach of cultured and quite normal people. Matthew's sorrow for his dead daughter in *The Two April Mornings* and his general review of human life in *The Fountain* have an elemental purity and simplicity about them, and if they do not reach tragic intensity, it is only because of the freshness and unconventionality of the mood which is brought to bear on them, and an elasticity of temper which tends to glance off from the deeper shadows that darken life to a swift rebound into mirth and light-hearted gaiety.

Here Wordsworth must be given the credit of having discovered a really interesting and original figure in rustic life, and it is no detraction from his credit to urge that Matthew is an idealized portrait, and can hardly be taken as the type of an average rustic. The language, too, though not transcending the limits of rustic speech, attains, in its enunciation of deeper truths and representation of a deeper vein of feeling, a higher level of expressiveness than in any of the poems



of the first group, professedly dealing with more impassioned emotions. Stanzas like the following show much better than the poems previously dealt with the real points of correspondence between the language of poetry and that of prose.

Yet sometimes when the secret cup  
Of still and serious thought went round,  
He seemed as if he drank it up—  
He felt with spirit so profound.

*Matthew.*

No fountain from its rocky cave  
E'er tripped with foot so free;  
She seemed as happy as a wave  
That dances on the sea.

*The Two April Mornings.*

Thus fares it still in our decay;  
And yet the wiser mind  
Mourns less for what age takes away  
Than what it leaves behind.

*The Fountain.*

Possibly one reason why the style is so much more satisfactory in the above-mentioned stanzas is that they are informed by a deeper vein of thought, and do not strain after the attainment of the conversational note, for the rapid turns and quick transitions of which Wordsworth's mind, in all its massiveness and solemnity, was by no means ideally fit.

This is followed by a number of poems like *The Childless Father* and *The Two Thieves* (all added to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800), in which the interest lies not so much in discovering the traces of pathos and passion in incidents taken from rustic life, as in isolating some curious trait, some simple and engaging twist in the character of rustic people. The narrative element in these poems is of the thinnest, and hardly amounts to the description of an incident, merely sufficing to reveal one curious or odd feature of character. In *The Childless*



*Father* the pathos of the situation is but barely touched : whatever descriptive element the poem contains is bestowed upon the representation of the stir and bustle of the hunt ; and the poet's object is neither to work up the pathos nor to give a lively and adequate description of the chase, but merely to bring out that odd infirmity or elasticity (as it can be better designated) in the soul of the childless Timothy, which triumphs over the poignant sorrow of bereavement and urges him to join the merry group of holiday-makers "with a tear on his cheek". For the poet himself this oddity constitutes a veritable revelation, an interesting psychological discovery ; and its supposed importance relieves him from the necessity of engaging the reader's interest by the use of any specially poetic or imaginative means.

In *The Two Thieves* the object is likewise to reveal an interesting oddity in the character of an old man of ninety and his child-grandson of barely three years of age—an irresistible instinct in them of pilfering away petty trifles, developed, in the old man, out of his lifelong miserliness and greed for money, and imbibed quite innocently by the child from his grandsire's example. This is, again, for the poet the discovery of an important secret in human nature, which is his justification for having treated it in verse :

Long yet may'st thou live ! for a teacher we see  
That lifts up the veil of our nature in thee !

The reader does not share the poet's views as regards the importance of the discovery : nevertheless, he is prepared to enjoy the humour and lightness of touch with which the story is told, though in some instances the humour seems too thin-spun (e.g. Stanzas 7 and 8), and to admit that here the conversational style is quite fitly adapted to the level of feeling in the poem and its general tone. Indeed, the accent of conversation is much better in its place in poems where the humorous intention is prominent than in those dealing seriously with the deeper



emotions of life. *The Idiot Boy* is another illustration of this point, for its frank and sometimes uproarious mirth reconciles us much more to its conversational style and its garrulous repetitions and inanities than we are apt to feel in the case of more serious poems. And it is Wordsworth's failure to seize hold of this distinction that lands him in many a lapse and absurdity.

The same desire to touch rustic life only for drawing out of it an unexpected moral and psychological impression, or to isolate some elementary, curious trait of character, is also in evidence in *The Anecdote for Fathers* and *We are Seven*. The special interest of these poems lies in the fact that in them Wordsworth is concerned to trace out some interesting features of child-psychology—a thing that plays such a prominent part even in his mature poetry, and which he has put to a splendid imaginative use in his famous *Immortality Ode* and *The Rainbow*; so that the things represented in them are not merely matters of passing interest, but have an abiding place in Wordsworth's mature poetry. *The Anecdote for Fathers* reveals the danger of mishandling child-nature owing to an ignorance of the mystery of its ways: to call upon the child to give a rational account of its mysterious likes and dislikes is inevitably to urge it on towards the path of falsehood.

*We are Seven* tends to lay bare an even profounder mystery in the soul of the child, its failure to realize death as an actuality and to seize the distinction between it and life. This trait of the child-soul is to Wordsworth an additional proof that it has an instinctively surer grasp of the ultimate truth than the reason of the mature man, and that it is the child's abounding and ever-present sense of immortality that makes all talk about death such a meaningless jargon to it. And though both these poems deal with interesting traits of childhood, there is a vast gulf between them as regards imaginative treatment. *The Anecdote for Fathers* makes on us the impression of something quite blunt and



matter-of-fact; the psychological truth embodied in it does not excite any depth of feeling either in the poet or in our selves and is not, in any way, imaginatively transformed. *We are Seven*, on the contrary, is steeped in all the tender grace and artless simplicity of childhood, and there is a vein of deep and tender feeling running through all its simple prattles. The poem appeals to us not merely for the psychology which it lays bare, but for the tenderness and imaginative power with which it is grasped. And the language of the poem is a triumphant vindication of Wordsworth's power to infuse depth of feeling even into the simplest and most commonplace words. It is a noticeable fact that wherever the poet's imagination is rightly stirred, he sheds off the tendency to garrulous prolixity and to put in superfluous details which besets him in his more uninspired poems. He chooses instead the simplest words which are at the same time imaginatively effective, instead of making a vain and feeble effort towards the attainment of a conversational sparkle—a thing that did not lie in the line of Wordsworth's genius.

*The Idiot Boy* is a poem which is somewhat difficult to classify, standing as it does on the border-line between poems dealing with essential passions and those more concerned with elementary feelings. The kind of maternal love treated in the poem seems more akin to the elementary than to the essential passions. It does not certainly appeal to us with the same depth or intensity as *The Affliction of Margaret*, *The Forsaken Indian Woman*, or *The Mad Mother*. Wordsworth would certainly claim that in this poem the maternal feeling finds a passionate expression, and in his letter to Wilson (N. C. Smith, *Wordsworth's Prose Writings*, pp. 3—11), protests that the contemptuous feelings it excites in the reader are due to the perverted associations that have come to cluster round the word "idiot". For himself the word opens up a vista of an altogether different kind, as it suggests a type of person whose deficiency in ordinary common sense is the index



of a closer approach to the inner fountains of Divine Wisdom. The mother's love for such an idiot child is moreover the maternal love *par excellence*, as it passes a more severe test ; it is, moreover, a feeling peculiar to the poor alone, and redounding to the glory of human nature. Thus Wordsworth takes care to affiliate the poem to his theory in all respects. He aims in it both at tracing an essential passion as also at an indirect glorification of rustic life. Coleridge, possibly nettled by such extravagant claims, goes to the opposite extreme, and adjudges it to be something not very much above the level of the ridiculous both because of the idiocy of the child and the fatuous inanity in the love of the mother.

To us, looking at the matter with a quite unprejudiced mind, the poem appears to be neither sublime nor ridiculous ; it is a very delightful poem, enlivened by sallies of humour and marked throughout by a genial lightness of touch as well as admirable narrative pace and flow ; and we feel ourselves quite reconciled to it, unless called upon by the poet to accept it as a new gospel of rustic life. We cannot take the poem as an intense expression of essential passion, for to intensity of any kind it can certainly make no claim : and the very light-heartedness of the poet goes far to prevent any impression of sublimity. Nevertheless, we are quite prepared to accept it as a delightful description of the maternal feeling reduced to its simplest elements, a love not marked by the poetry and passion of *The Affliction of Margaret*, but by a meandering, instinctive sort of simplicity which is by no means lacking in its special charm. It would thus be better to take it as an expression of the *elementary* rather than of the *essential* passion, though possibly the poet in his prepossession might have meant it as an embodiment of the latter. We have already touched upon the special appropriateness of the conversational style of the poem. This conversational style, which is felt to be a hindrance and an intruder in serious poems of passion like *The Thorn*, is



quite in its place in *The Idiot Boy*, and moves along with an easy pace and swing, being admirably fitted to the special nature of the subject-matter.

There are a few other poems, like *Simon Lee*, *Andrew Jones*, and *The Reverie of Poor Susan*, which are difficult to include within any one of the four groups distinguished above. They deal with simple and rather colourless incidents drawn from rustic life, but the intention of the poet in them cannot be affiliated to any one of the fourfold purposes which influenced his choice of rustic themes. In *The Reverie of Poor Susan*, Wordsworth aims at bringing out a feeling bred by love of Nature in the homesick heart of the village girl drawn by fate into the vortex of London life, a feeling which, whether we consider it essential or elementary, is strong enough to induce a momentary forgetfulness of her actual environment, and conjure up visions of her village home. The poet himself refers to the poem along with *The Childless Father* as an illustration of "feeling giving importance to action and situation", and we are quite willing to admit the intensity of the feeling evoked in it. Perhaps Wordsworth here simply wants to bring out the strong spell that Nature casts upon her children who live a rustic life, and the importance he attaches to the feeling would lead him to rank it rather with the essential passions, though it is not so universal as some of the other feelings described in poems of the first group.

In *Simon Lee* there seems to be a twofold object : first to work up the feeling of pathos by an emphasis on the helpless and desolate condition of Simon Lee and then to draw a striking and unexpected moral from this pathetic picture. But, as a matter of fact, the first object is very feebly achieved : a matter-of-fact and unemotional recital of Simon's tale of woe hardly suffices to rouse a keen sense of pathos in the reader. Moreover, the poem does not describe the birth of any passionate emotion in Simon himself under the stress of poverty, and cannot thus be taken to establish the special



theory of the poet about the greater emotional fervour of rustic life. The description of the miseries and privations of rustic life is quite a familiar tale in poetry, and Wordsworth certainly cannot claim any originality in this respect. His real originality consists in the sudden and profound turn that he gives to the moral judgment of the reader, the very plenitude of thanks and profusion of gratitude on the part of the poor man for a trivial service rendered to him revealing a horrid vista of the general callousness and want of sympathy prevalent in human society. It is this unexpected turn given to the final moral that places the whole story in a new light before our mind, and impresses it vividly on the imagination. The poem thus illustrates not the capacity of rustic life to mature strong and fervent emotions, but rather the capacity of the poet to receive a strikingly new moral impression from it. It thus redounds more to the credit of the poet himself than to that of rustic life. In point of language, *Simon Lee* reveals some of the worst ineptitudes of the poet. The conversational effect is aimed at, with fatal results to poetry ; and the poem serves as a definite warning of the danger incurred in a too thoroughgoing attempt to bring down the language of poetry to the level of conversational prose. Poems such as these tend to establish that it is only within certain well-defined limits that the language of conversation or of prose can be used in poetry without any detriment to the poetic effect. A definition of these limits will be attempted towards the end of this survey ; but it is well to be on our guard against a too absolute and indiscriminate application of the theory of language promulgated by Wordsworth.

*Andrew Jones* is without even this redeeming feature that retrieves *Simon Lee* to a certain extent. In it the heartlessness of a boorish peasant is met with a sally of half-sportive wrath, and the half-sportive invocation of a curse upon his head. The story of the poem does not tend



to bring out either an essential passion or an elementary feeling ; it has neither any emotional intensity nor any psychological interest. And the prosaic, matter-of-fact bent of the poet's mind, albeit touched with something of a humorous intention, is apparent in his exact repetition of the first stanza at the end of the poem, as if he had succeeded in proving exactly what he had set about to prove. It is difficult to understand the reason for the choice of such a subject. Possibly the poet thought that the bare suggestion of pathos, even when untouched by his own imaginative interpretation and treated in a merely half-sportive vein, would send a poetic thrill to the reader's heart. The reader, with his judgment fortified by a familiarity with the best things of Wordsworth himself, does not find his way to endorse this view of the poet.



#### IV *Poems uninfluenced by theories*

THE last three poems, *The Reverie of Poor Susan*, *Simon Lee* and *Andrew Jones*, represent a class in which Wordsworth tends rather to lay stress on the general pathos of poverty in rustic life than to enunciate his special theories with respect to it. From these we may pass, by a natural transition, to another group of poems in which the appreciation of the pathos of rustic life is still more uninfluenced by the poet's prepossessions. The best poem of this group in the *Lyrical Ballads* is *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, with its companion piece *The Old Man Travelling*, the other poems being *The Female Vagrant* and *Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree*. In these poems the poet's attitude to rustic life cannot be claimed as original: he merely follows the old line of treatment and continues the tradition of Thomson and Gray, though with a much greater emotional fervour and an infinitely greater command upon pathos. Very few traces of Wordsworth's peculiar theory are to be found in them, unless of course his very recognition of the importance of rustic life as a subject for poetic treatment, and the deeper pathos with which he invests the incidents, are traced back to it. The theory about the identity of language between prose and poetry, or about the approximation to the actual speech of men, seems also to have been completely laid aside. Moreover, Wordsworth here gives us all that imaginative interpretation which we are accustomed to look forward to from poets, and draws out to the full the latent emotions implicit in an apparently trivial subject-matter. He does not, as in the case of his other rustic poems, leave the naked and bare incidents to tell their own tale. This group has thus a decided interest about it, as it affords a comparison between poems written under the obsession of a theory which seems to dispense with imaginative treatment, and those in which the poet does not neglect his usual function of an interpreter of the feelings and emotions. And while



the first group throws a vivid light on the mentality of the poet and on the hidden source of strength and passion in his heart which lends at times such a quiet and unobtrusive intensity to his treatment of rustic life, the advantage in point of achieved poetic excellence clearly rests with the second.

*The Female Vagrant*, though incorporated in the First Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), belongs to an earlier period, and is not certainly conceived in the new spirit that Wordsworth brought to bear upon rustic life, nor meant as an illustration of the peculiar theories, both as to the choice of subject and language, first enunciated in that volume. It clearly precedes the enunciation of Wordsworth's new gospel and philosophy about the healing influence of nature on the sorrows of human life. It belongs to that period of unrest and gloom which beset the troubled soul of the poet after his return from the French sojourn, and before the dawn of that radiant hope and irrepressible optimism which is the marked feature of his really characteristic poetry. During this period the poet's mind was passing through strange experiences and receiving the impress of obscure inspirations and indefinable shaping forces—was in short undergoing that mysterious transformation which forms the inevitable experience of every first-rate creative soul before it comes to evolve its true self. We do not know the exact process in which this dark and troubled welter came to be resolved into radiant peace and a quiet certitude of conviction: we ascribe it to vague, general reasons—the influence of his sister, or the recovery of his old thrill of joy in nature, fortified by a new philosophy of faith. But in spite of all our explanations, based on an elaboration of the poet's own vague and obscure hints in *The Prelude*, the exact process of convalescence continues to be a mystery to us, as every vital change in the inner depths of another's soul is necessarily bound to be. The general rapture and paeans of joy in *The Prelude* are



so hard to fit in with the facts of ordinary actual life, there is such a difference, in the very nature of things, between achievement and quest, between the joy won and the joy wooed, that in spite of the poet's efforts to present a scrupulously truthful picture of this vital change in his soul, we are not very much the wiser. We are conscious of gaps between the happiness come and the sorrow gone which no retrospect can adequately fill up.

And after all, what tangible evidence can there be to offer for such an inner change—an evidence which we can sift with our intellect and weigh on the palm of our hand? It is the old story of Creation over again—the Spirit brooding over troubled waters and the restless turmoil of chaos, and transforming them into the serene ordered beauty of cosmic life. Through intensity of vision, Wordsworth penetrated into the core of all the dark and discordant facts of life, and discovered the vision of “Central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation”. The change lies in a conquest achieved over the obdurate facts of experience by a quickening of the imaginative vision ; and we must confess we cannot get to anything more tangible than this. The wind that stirs the poetic fire and makes it burn brighter is, as is well known, a capricious, uncertain thing, and cannot be traced back to its original home.

It is for this reason that all the greater interest attaches to poems of the transitional period, which can afford the only definite clues available to the groping of the poet's soul, its dark sojourn in that “long gorge which leads the way to the far light”. In these poems we come across the same facts as in his maturer productions, but facts as yet unsubdued by the new spirit ; identical materials which rouse questionings yet unsilenced by the new faith ; tragedy wrapped round with gloom and despair, and without the sunshine of faith and hope gleaming on its forehead. All these afford interesting indications that bring out the measure of the gulf between the regenerate



and unregenerate days of the poet and it is evidence of this character that is plentifully to be gleaned from the stanzas of *The Female Vagrant*.

In *The Female Vagrant*, which is but a fragment from a much longer poem, *Guilt and Sorrow* (left unpublished till 1842), Wordsworth gives us a picture of sombre and unrelieved gloom in rustic life. There are unmistakable indications that at the time of writing this poem Wordsworth had not yet developed his optimism and faith in nature : he was probably collecting materials with a view to shaping his final faith and perfecting it. In the first place, the story is told with a bold literalism and an impressive and elaborate pathos that is in sharp contrast with the bare and naked recital of his theory-ridden days. Then the difference also extends to the choice of subject : though the subject in *The Female Vagrant* is selected from rustic life, yet it is provided with a variety of incidents and situations, all rich in pathetic effects. The woman, peasant as she is, suffers from vicissitudes and afflictions quite sufficient to have weighed down a crowned head. And she does not suffer from the reticence that Wordsworth later on came to develop, but brings out her sorrows in all their fullness, and with as much impressive eloquence as she can command. This is very different from the method generally adopted in the *Lyrical Ballads*, where the most trivial and unpromising situations are selected, and treated in a matter-of-fact, unemotional strain, under the illusion that their native pathos will go home, even if not winged with poetic art.

Still greater is the incompatibility with the *Lyrical Ballads* temper in the matter of poetic language. On this head Wordsworth does not seem to have made any progress towards the views expressed in the Prefaces, and appears still linked to the eighteenth-century practice. The reader is surprised to come across such typical examples of the "vicious poetic diction" as "fleecy store" (for sheep), (St. 1), "May's dewy prime" and "snowy pride" (St. 3), "native bowers"



(St. 7), "the glittering main" (St. 16), "the wild brood" (for gipsies), (St. 24), in the very volume whose Preface contains such an uncompromising and deeply-laid campaign against it. Nor is there any attempt to imitate the accent of actual rustic speech, though the speaker is a rustic character, or to establish the identity between the language of prose and poetry, deviations from the prose order being more marked than perhaps in any subsequent poem of Wordsworth, and this on account of the complicated structure of the Spenserian stanza adopted by the poet. The poem seems clearly to be of an earlier origin, and to belie the Preface under whose auspices it is ushered forth into the world.

But the poem is none the worse for its nonconformity to the theory embodied in the Preface. Barring a few turgid and overwrought passages, specially in Stanza 18 and some awkward inversions dictated by metrical needs, it is marked by a depth and sincerity of feeling which inevitably leads to the right sort of style. There is occasionally a violent, untamed energy of expression which reminds us of the red-hot revolutionary, fresh from his fiery experiences in France, and which ill accords with our traditional conception of the staid and sober Wordsworth. The fierce radicalism of his opinions bursts out here and there to the surface ; unfortunately the full extent of such radicalism is irrecoverably lost to us because of the subsequent changes introduced into the poem by the tamer and more conservative spirit of his later days. The style is either simple or grand, as the passion sways, and both sorts are equally well in their places, being blended with magnificent effect in lines like the following :

Peaceful as some immeasurable plain  
By the first beams of dawning light impressed,  
In the calm sunshine slept the glittering main;  
The very ocean has its hour of rest,  
That comes not to the human mourner's breast.

Stanza 16.



We thus see that *The Female Vagrant* is almost entirely uninfluenced by the special theories of the poet, and raises very interesting speculations as to what the treatment of such themes in the hands of Wordsworth would have tended to become, if his mystical theories about rustic life and the healing influence of nature had not intervened to give a new turn to his genius, and if his career of development had lain quite in a straight line from the present poem. Wordsworth here shows his deep sympathy with, and interest in, rustic life, and dwells with all his force upon its pathos without giving any special direction to it; this note is never reproduced in any of the later poems. The old depth and sincerity of feeling is there, but it is given a new turn and modified by a new spirit. Even *Michael*, in spite of its austere recital of a tale of sorrow, emerges with an altogether different effect from the poet's mind: its sorrow is purged by passing through a medium of brooding peace and abiding faith. The Margaret episode, incorporated in *The Excursion*, is the nearest in spirit to *The Female Vagrant*, though the Wordsworthian philosophy has not been altogether without its influence upon it too.

The next poem of this group, which also antedates the period of the *Lyrical Ballads*, is *Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree*, to which the date 1795 is assigned. In it we find how Wordsworth's mind was gradually emerging out of the gulf of despondency, and drawing together the elements of that philosophy of life which transformed the meaning of the world for him and put a new expression in the face of experience. Here the rustic bias, whether in choice of subject or language, is altogether absent. The poet is here chewing the after-cud of his earlier revolutionary enthusiasm, and turning it by a strange alchemy into the sweet milk of a mystic faith in nature and an abiding love and reverence for man. He describes the life of an erstwhile enthusiast, whose soul was embittered through disappointment and ingratitude, and who, in



the bitterness of his soul, retired into solitude, there nursing himself with the food of pride and lonely contemplation. This person may be the first short sketch of a character, afterwards developed with such unsparing tediousness in the Solitary of *The Excursion* : and the delicate sympathy and understanding and the touch of poignancy with which he is painted are no doubt due to the poet's consciousness that he himself would have developed into such a being, unless arrested betimes by kindlier influences. The hero of the poem, though he lives in the country, is not certainly a rustic in the ordinary sense of the term : he is a man of culture who played his part in public life, and his soul moved on hinges other than those on which rustic life ordinarily turns. Nor are his feelings and emotions the essential or elementary ones that have their play in rustic life. His dominant passion was a peculiar morbidity of outlook which can only be bred by living in a highly complex form of social organization ; resembling rustic feelings only in its tenacious attachment to the forms and images of nature, with which it feels a subtle kinship and affinity. But as the effect of such communion with nature is but the confirmation of his mood of cynicism, the poem cannot by any means be taken as an illustration of that peculiar virtue of rustic life which provides for the incorporation of "the passions of men with the *beautiful* and *permanent* forms of nature".

The special interest of the poem lies not in its treatment of any rustic incident or situation or the deduction of any essential or elementary feeling therefrom ; but rather in its note of profound thoughtfulness and sympathy, culminating in the enunciation of the special Wordsworthian philosophy of human life, which enjoins love for the meanest created thing as a sacred duty which nobody can neglect without a loss of his finer feelings and intellect. Nor is the language in any way an imitation of actual speech. It moves on a consistently high level, and follows the best literary traditions,



while informed with a sincerity and directness that was Wordsworth's original contribution to high poetic style. There are lingering touches of the eighteenth-century stock diction, as in L.3—"No sparkling rivulet *spread the verdant herb*", but in general his style follows a sustained height, while occasionally it strikes a rarer note of austere sublimity, such as we have learned to associate with the inspired mood of Wordsworth :

Stranger ! these gloomy boughs  
Had charms for him ; and here he loved to sit,  
His only visitants a straggling sheep,  
The stonechat, or the glancing sandpiper.

In *The Old Cumberland Beggar* the pathos attains its climax, though at the same time it is modified with a note of exaltation and joy that Wordsworth came lately to develop. Here also there is but very little trace of that peculiar mystical attitude towards rustic life which informs his theories in the Preface, though the halo of nature has been shed upon the sordid, helpless life of the Beggar: here, likewise, there is no attempt to trace essential or elementary feelings. The Beggar himself is a too passive character to be capable of any outburst of emotion ; but in his perfect and helpless passivity he almost resembles one of the great impersonal influences of nature that heal and soothe and inspire. In his silent visits and unresponding acceptances of charity he serves to keep alive the kindly mood in man, and is thus a much more effective preacher than any that ever mounted the pulpit. Wordsworth here has made no new departure in his treatment of rustic life ; he does not read any occult significance, perceptible to him alone, into a trivial episode ; he simply follows the traditional line reopened by Gray, Goldsmith and Cowper, and does what every other sympathetic poet would have done. Of course, he does it much better than any other poet we could think of ; he informs the subject with a depth of sympathy, an intense yet restrained emotion showing itself in a



loving enumeration of the infirmities of the old man, that goes almost to transform him into a sublime being conferring favours rather than accepting them. Nor is the poet chary of moralizings ; he draws out to the full the moral and beneficent aspects of the Beggar's services to society, and deprecates any attempt on the part of the legislature to intercept the kindly influences that he is the unconscious instrument of disseminating round about him. But his moralizings here are so fresh and informed by such a depth and sincerity of feeling as well as an originality of thought that they constitute an essential part of the story and vitally co-operate in the creation of the imaginative impression. And towards the end, the moral reflections catch fire, as it were, take on the hues of imagination, and present the old creeping Beggar as raised almost to a superhuman level, no unworthy companion of that hero of the opening poem of the volume, the far-famed Ancient Mariner, though working in a humbler and preaching his lesson in a much more unobtrusive fashion.

The language, too, has frankly discarded all trace and tinge of rustic speech ; it is the language of a cultured man, capable of profound thoughts and far-reaching reflections, and raised far above the simple prattle of such poems as *Simon Lee* and *The Thorn*. The vocabulary is not confined to the limited scope within which a rustic mind is apt to move, but ranges freely over the entire realm of literary usage. And yet there is no trace of anything second-hand and derivative in his use of diction ; the hand does not set down any word which the heart has not already sanctioned. His moral reflections do not bring any conventional words or verbose diction in their train, as the tame and commonplace moralizings of the eighteenth-century poets are so apt to do. And though there is just an element of danger in the predominance of the reflective element, which is the index of a mind prone to lapse into prosaicism, this danger is not yet



apparent : the strong feeling under which the poet writes carries along with it even the most solid and matter-of-fact elements in his thought and style. And at times there is not wanting that crowning glory of the Wordsworthian style—the achievement of a noble and austere simplicity.

Then let him pass—a blessing on his head !  
And, long as he can wander, let him breathe  
The freshness of the valleys : let his blood  
Struggle with frosty air and winter snows ;  
And let the chartered wind that sweeps the heath,  
Beat his grey locks against his withered face,

and, finally,

As in the eye of Nature he has lived,  
So in the eye of Nature let him die.

These last few poems, as already pointed out, go to show the existence of a dual strain in Wordsworth's treatment of rustic life. In the one class he allows his theories to take complete possession of him, both in respect of choice of subject and method of treatment. He chooses the most trivial and commonplace incidents ; and what is worse, makes no effort to lift them up, following the method of a tame and matter-of-fact recital without any attempt to work up the feelings. He does this under the belief that the subject itself is sufficient to make its own impression, without any help from the poet. *The Mad Mother* and *The Forsaken Indian Woman* are the only poems that reach a sustained pitch of passion, partly because the incidents have been rightly chosen, and partly because the characters are made to speak under the stress of intense excitement. Wordsworth's theory would have had a much greater chance of commanding universal acceptance if he had been more careful in his selection of illustrative incidents. But in his eagerness to show the wide range of subjects to which his theory is applicable, and the rich variety of illustrations of which it is capable, he unfortunately stumbles into numerous



instances of unhappy and inappropriate choice, which goes to shake the entire foundation of his theory. At any rate, he leaves the impression that the new vein in rustic life, the discovery of which he trumpets forth so loudly to the world, is, after all, a thin and slender one, capable of yielding but a meagre output, and undeserving of the dignity of the enunciation of a special theory. He would not have been so bold in his generalization if he had been more capable of distinguishing the gems from the pebbles in his selection of incidents from rustic life.

For it is a fact that in spite of Wordsworth's preoccupation with rustic life he has given us comparatively few concrete examples of situations from that life ; he has rather idealized it in theory than revealed its passionate character and tenor by actual illustrations. In *The Prelude* we get eloquent testimonies to the wisdom and goodness of rustic characters, and to the profound impression made by them on the poet's heart, as revealing the innate nobility and native dignity of human nature, but we do not find any one of these characters sketched out for our benefit. They shine out enlarged and transcendent through the haze of the poet's gratitude, just as in their actual physical life they appeared stalking in gigantic size on the mist-shrouded mountains and valleys. In *The Excursion* the poet has presented us to a few rustic people, like the Wanderer and the Vicar, who are no doubt imbued with the most irreproachable philosophy, and talk words of transcendent wisdom. But we are not shown how they picked it up in the course of their usual vocations ; and, moreover, they echo the poet's personal thoughts and feelings with such a close reproduction that we take them to be mere reflections and replicas of the poet himself, and not as independent characters drawn from real life. And the confusion is rather increased than diminished by the poet's introducing himself also as a member of the party, and putting in his voice sometimes in the midst of the general chorus in which the tones of



the several speakers are wellnigh indistinguishable. It is only in the case of a very few poems that Wordsworth succeeds in bringing out the real nobility and intense passionateness of rustic people underneath their rugged austerity of external manners, and the narrowness of their range of thought—the stern tenacity of purpose, the unchangeable constancy that they seem to derive from the soil itself and the spirit of local attachment. *The Brothers* and *Michael*, with a few short episodes in Books VI and VII of *The Excursion*, are the only poems that naturally suggest themselves as those in which this conception of rustic character is actually embodied.

There is no mistaking the sincerity of Wordsworth's glorification of rustic life, and the reality of the inspiration he derived therefrom ; but in his actual poems on the subject he rather idealizes the general impression than sketches a detailed picture. In his most characteristic instances of idealization—whether it is Lucy Gray tripping over the lonesome wilds after her mysterious disappearance from the ken of man, or the lonely Leech-gatherer almost non-human in the absoluteness of his immobility, or the Solitary Reaper with the poignant suggestions of a vaguely felt tragedy in her song—it is not so much with rustic life itself and the elements of passion and oddity in it that the poet is concerned, as with a subtle and thrilling emanation from it. It is a kind of transfusion between rustic life and the spirit of Nature herself, in its deep, brooding calm, and subtle suggestions of passion ; a linking of the life of man with the impassioned expression which is in the face of all Nature. It is this rarer distillation, if one can call it so, a thing that goes deeper than mere manners and character, which are the study of the novelist, that Wordsworth gives us. But as for the passionate and dramatic incidents and situations from rustic life, Crabbe, in his matter-of-fact unimaginative way and his close fidelity to actual facts, records a much greater number of them for us than can be gleaned



from all the pages of Wordsworth. Wordsworth rightly speaks of the passions of his rustic life as purer ; for such passions have the least imprint upon them of the commerce of the world. In a sense they are almost disembodied ; and they are pure, as containing the minimum of the human element, they offer a pure, unobstructed medium for the spirit of Nature to work upon and blend with them.

In the second class of poems represented by such pieces as *The Female Vagrant*, *Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree*, and *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, the poet takes up a more normal attitude both with respect to the subject-matter and also a sense of his own duties. He selects subjects with a sufficient pathetic interest in them, and works up the pathos with all the depth of feeling of which he is the master. Here the traces of his mystic assumptions with respect to rustic life are not very strong : he does not assume anything, he demonstrates. He brings out the normal emotional values of situations, instead of reading into them a mystic value which nobody else subscribes to. His mysticism operates here only indirectly by enabling him to penetrate into the inmost pathetic core of the subject he describes ; others, unaided by the mystic vision, could not have pierced so deep, or felt so poignantly. Moreover, the specially Wordsworthian element in the last two poems consists in the philosophy of a wise endurance and consolation springing therefrom, that he evolves out of the sorrowful experiences of life. This constitutes quite a normal development into which the reader finds it not very difficult to follow the poet : and such poems do not thus form an illustration of any peculiarities in Wordsworth's conception of rustic life.

Poems of this class are not very numerous in Wordsworth's poetry : they belong almost exclusively to the early period of his poetic career, when his own unsettled mind and tragic experiences brought him into a rather close grip with the sorrow and helpless misery round about him. The story of Margaret, though incorporated



in the First Book of *The Excursion*, belongs, as already stated, to this period. With the hardening of the poetical fibres in him that was soon to set in, Wordsworth tends to lose his grip on such sorrow-laden, tragic themes. Possibly to the poet settled so comfortably and amidst circumstances of such idyllic peace in his mountain-home, the shadows of sorrow did not seem to loom so large as before on the horizon. Certainly the subject "of sorrow barricaded for evermore within the walls of cities" remained unsung. His personal griefs and bereavements, except in the one solitary instance of *Peele Castle*, were rather stoically endured than artistically expressed. This Wordsworthian philosophy of patient endurance and austere consolation is, towards the middle of his career, shifted to an altogether different background from that of rustic life, to a world of mediaeval passions and feudal associations—in the *White Doe of Rylstone*, published in 1807. Thus the tragic treatment of humble life did not represent a permanent phase of interest in the poet's mind, and did not survive the best period of his inspiration.





## V Rustic life in "*The Excursion*"

WE now turn to poems included in groups (3) and (4) which are taken together for convenience of treatment. From what has been said above, it will be clear that Wordsworth has but few poems dealing with the *manners* of rustic life. He deals only with simple incidents and situations, and hardly undertakes the more detailed sort of treatment that is calculated to bring out manners. His was not the standpoint of the novelist, and it is but very seldom that he reveals to us how the manners of rural life germinate from the elementary feelings which he traces from its simpler and more commonplace incidents. Usually he never goes beyond these elementary feelings themselves to their subsequent culmination into manners : and though he offers us repeated theoretical testimony as to the simplicity and dignity of rural manners, he does not give us any detailed and concrete illustration of the fact. And the short glimpses into the lives of the Cumbrian dalesmen, and the kindness and fellow-feeling marking their social intercourse that we receive from passages of *The Prelude*, though they offer strong confirmation of the truth of Wordsworth's theory, can hardly be taken as substitutes for full-length realistic portraitures. Wordsworth's brief remarks contain implicitly and in essence what has been unfolded to us with such wealth and fullness of details and poignancy of sympathy in such a story as the pathetic one of George and Sarah Green in De Quincey's *Early Memorials of Grasmere*.

It is in poetry of a much later date, in which Wordsworth's special theories have lost much of their sharpness of edge, viz. in the Vicar's narrations in the Sixth and Seventh Books of *The Excursion*, that we get the nearest approach to the description of the manners of rural life. Incidents are selected, not as in the *Lyrical Ballads*, with the object of bringing out the latent emotions (however unsuccessfully this may be carried out) of quite



unpromising and commonplace situations or to trace essential or elementary feelings in rustic characters, but to throw light on the ordinarily mixed tenor of rustic life, with special stress on its richness in pathos and in the qualities of sympathy and patient endurance in affliction which rustics exhibit. Moreover, the interest is enhanced by the profound reflections on human life and destiny which are interspersed in the recital. The stories may be taken as fairly covering the entire range of rustic life : a man pining with unrequited love, and gradually subduing his anguish under the healing influence of nature ; a lonely miser persevering in his digging and delving until he hits upon the precious vein, and bears his prosperity much worse than his struggles ; a rustic talent profusely endowed with natural gifts brought to an untimely and ignominious end through irresolution and indecision of character ; two men of opposite political principles harmonized and drawn into mutual friendship under the benign influence of solitude : a clergyman retiring from the precincts of the Court and aristocratic circles into the mountain solitudes, and triumphing, by virtue of a restless activity of the mind, over the pangs of multiplied bereavement ; the strange consolation and serenity of mind that wait upon a deaf and a blind man ; a proud and hard-hearted woman softened and relenting on the eve of death ; a widower "evidencing his faithful affection towards the deceased wife by his care of the daughters" ; a youth of rare promise snatched away by a sudden fever—in all these we get a sufficient variety of incidents and a silent depth of feeling crowded into the ordinary tenor of rural life, lending a quiet dignity and strength as well as a subtle delicacy and refinement to rustic manners. The Pastor deliberately excludes from his survey the more tragic and turbulent passions which run their course with unchecked fury, and do not admit any opening of brotherly forgiveness or consolatory reflection. He similarly abstains from cases of brutish



deformity and vice in its utter repulsiveness.

But within these self-imposed limitations he moves both with an easy and assured mastery and an intensity of transforming sympathy. He gives us only one story of an innocent girl seduced and led astray ; but this solitary lapse from virtue has been the source of such a sincere penitence on the part of the offender, and has unlocked such deep springs of tenderness and humility in her, that her very sin has made her more lovable to us, and brought her into more intimate spiritual union with her Creator. Whatever we might say with respect to the *Lyrical Ballads*, not even the most captious critic can deny that in these few short stories in *The Excursion* Wordsworth has made good his promise to reveal a vein of passion in rustic life, though it is passion passive rather than active, passion consisting rather in silent endurance of "the inner store of unsunned griefs" than in any violent active outburst, that is illustrated, and the manners, quiet and steady, rather than peculiar or interesting, that spring from such passions.

With respect to some of these stories Wordsworth follows the methods of Crabbe and naturally invites a comparison with him. No doubt he is seldom as direct and dramatic as Crabbe : he does not use any dialogue, and very rarely makes his characters speak at all, taking the narrative and the commentary entirely upon himself. But in some of the stories there is a stress laid on psychological interest, rather than on the purely emotional one, which serves to remind us of Crabbe. Thus in the story of the persevering miser, the main interest centres on the description of the unsteady effects of a sudden prosperity, and there is no attempt to interweave the profound reflections on nature and human life that are so characteristic of Wordsworth.

But our swain,  
A very hero till his point was gained,  
Proved all unable to support the weight



Of prosperous fortune. On the fields he looked  
With an unsettled liberty of thought,  
Wishes and endless schemes ; by daylight walked,  
Giddy and restless ; ever and anon  
Quaffed in his gratitude immoderate cups,  
And truly might be said to die of joy.

*The Excursion*, Book VI, LI. 235-245.

Wordsworth here attains a Crabbe-like effect, and refrains from soaring into loftier heights. Similarly the story of *The Genius of the Hills*, alternating thoughtlessly between respectability and vulgar and vagrant society, and finally driven to a shameful death, has more of a psychological than emotional appeal about it, though here Wordsworth soars above the usual pedestrianism of Crabbe and introduces imaginative touches that lift the subject to a higher level. The reckless Prodigal is compared to

. . . . the mute swan that floats adown the stream,  
Or, on the waters of the unruffled lake,  
Anchors her placid beauty. Not a leaf,  
That flutters on the bough, lighter than he ;  
And not a flower, that drops in the green shade,  
More winningly reserved.

*Ibid.*, Book VI, LI. 293-298.

And, again, his perverse frustration of all hopes built upon him is described as follows :

. . . but all hopes,  
Cherished for him, he suffered to depart,  
Like blighted buds ; or clouds that mimicked land  
Before the sailor's eye ; or diamond drops  
That sparkling decked the morning grass ; or aught  
That was attractive, and hath ceased to be

*Ibid.*, Book VI, LI. 313-318.

Then again, the story of the woman hardened into the practice of the utmost thriftiness, and fretting with restless discontent, has quite a Crabbe-like air about it : but while Crabbe develops his story with appropriate details and concrete illustrations of conduct, and expands it



into, a full-length realistic narrative, Wordsworth contents himself with drawing out the general emotional tenor of such a life.

Dread life of conflict which I oft compared  
To the agitation of a brook that runs  
Down a rocky mountain, buried now and lost  
In silent pools, now in strong eddies chained ;  
But never to be charmed to gentleness :  
Its best attainment fits of such repose  
As timid eyes might shrink from fathoming.

*The Excursion*, Book VI, LI. 734-40.

The story of Ellen, told with such poignant and almost transfiguring pathos, resembles a story told in Crabbe's *Tales*, where is described the heroic resistance of a constant girl (Lucy) against the efforts of her mother to force her into uncongenial marriage, and the beautiful detachment and serenity of spirit that steals over her as her frail frame, worn out by its silent struggles, draws near to the moment of its dissolution. Here it is Crabbe that approaches Wordsworth in his employment of a more imaginative and idealizing method : but even in this instance of the closest approximation, differences in method, consisting in a more abundant use of details, and in a more pronounced dramatic tone, still tend to persist.

The clergyman, fretting under a spirit of restless activity, and his wife are thus summed up for us, the very comparison with the objects of nature tending to tone down the sharpness of realistic portraiture, and conferring something of an idealized grace on the figures.

Him might we liken to the setting sun  
As seen not seldom on some gusty day,  
Struggling and bold, and shining from the west  
With an inconstant and unmellowed light :  
She was a soft attendant cloud, that hung  
As if with wish to veil the restless orb ;  
From which it did itself imbibe a ray  
Of pleasing lustre.

*Ibid.*, Book VII, LI. 230-237.



But the characteristic note of Wordsworth is struck in the easy and effortless grandeur which he can breathe into the face of even the most commonplace incidents of rustic life. Whatever might be said about his success in furnishing concrete illustrations and dramatic representations of cases in which the actual passions of rustic life are found interwoven with "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature"—a circumstance which is put forward as one of the reasons for his selection of rural incidents—it cannot be gainsaid that he himself in his imaginative treatment of rustic life shows an unfailing power to set the trivial situations of that life against a lofty background of the noble aspects of nature and link them with the noblest feelings of the human heart. A deaf dalesman suggests the following august and sublime reflections in the poet's mind :

He grew up  
From year to year in loneliness of soul ;  
And this deep mountain-valley was to him  
Soundless, with all its streams . . .

. . . when stormy winds  
Were working the broad bosom of the lake  
Into a thousand thousand sparkling waves,  
Rocking the trees, or driving cloud on cloud  
Along the sharp edge of yon lofty crags,  
The agitated scene before his eye  
Was silent as a picture

*The Excursion*, Book VII, LI. 402-405 and 409-415.

And of the blind man he speaks in the following strain :

Yet of the wild brooks ask if he complained ;  
Ask of the channelled rivers if they held  
A safer, easier, more determined, course,  
What terror doth it strike into the mind  
To think of one, blind and alone, advancing  
Straight towards some precipice's airy brink !

*Ibid.*, Book VII, LI. 488-493.

A youth of rare promise who died a premature death elicits the following comparison :



## The Mountain-ash

- No eye can overlook, when 'mid a grove  
Of yet unfaded trees she lifts her head  
Decked with autumnal berries, that outshine  
Spring's richest blossoms ; and ye may have marked,  
By a brook-side, or a solitary tarn,  
How she her station doth adorn ; the pool  
Glow's at her feet, and all the gloomy rocks  
Are brightened round her. In his native vale  
Such and so glorious did this youth appear.

*The Excursion, Book VII, LI. 714-723*

The secret of the process through which Wordsworth shed this rare glory and lustre on rustic life seems to have disappeared with him : and it has been given to no other poet after him to open up such depths in its apparently trivial and uneventful surface. It is time however to return to a survey of the rustic poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* which give a picture of rustic manners and of passions of rustic life "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature".



## VI *Transfusion between nature and rustic life*

THERE are only two poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* which can be taken as fairly answering to the description—*The Brothers* and *Michael*. They are the only ones which are long and detailed enough to give us an idea of rustic manners and the general tenor of rural society: and they show, if not directly, at any rate by implication, what an important influence Nature exerts in fixing and steadying the domestic affections of rustic life, and in lending to them even a kind of solemn sanctity which they scarcely attain in any other sphere of life. In *The Brothers* the familiar face of the landscape is scrutinized with an anxious trembling love as the record and chronicler of the deepest human feelings. Leonard, returned after his long absence, inquires of the churchyard for an answer to the question he dares not ask of any human interlocutor, and scans the neighbouring scenery for a confirmation or dissipation of his worst misgivings. Never, except in the case of crazy love-lyrics, was a dearer secret consigned to the bosom of Nature; and never were her forms and images charged with a tenderer memory of a fraternal love that left its ineffaceable stamp on every stone that lined the roadside, or every brook that was swollen by a winter's rain. And yet this fusion between Nature and the human feelings is accomplished in an apparently austere and matter-of-fact mood of recital, without any touch of lyrical poignancy or over-excitement. The interruptions and ejaculations of Leonard in the midst of the Vicar's narrative reveal a dramatic power in the poet not very often brought to the surface.

As for the language, its blank verse runs on with an easy conversational flow, and although it is a matter of opinion as to whether the style has the genuine rustic accent about it and could naturally emanate from the narrow range of the rustic intellect, it studiously avoids all the subtler graces and heightened expressiveness of



poetry. Sometimes it is overburdened by a rather too prosaic solicitude for prefatory and explanatory remarks : e.g. in the following passage :

. . . Yes,  
Though from the cradle they had lived with Walter,  
The only kinsman near them, and though he  
Inclined to both by reason of his age,  
With a more fond, familiar tenderness.

*The Brothers*, Ll. 242-246.

Sometimes it creeps on such a low level, that not even the barriers of the blank verse are able to save it from lapsing into prose, and that of the most pedestrian sort, fit only for conveying information. Coleridge justly objects to the style of such a passage as this :

The loiterer, not unnoticed by his comrades,  
Lay stretched at ease ; but, passing by the place  
On their return, they found that he was gone.  
No ill was feared ; till one of them by chance,  
Entering, when evening was far spent, the house  
Which at that time was James's home, there learned  
That nobody had seen him all that day.

*Ibid.*, Ll. 370-376, Mackail, *Coleridge's  
Literary Criticism*, p. 66, footnote.

Language such as this has not even the cheap expedient of an inversion to distinguish it from prose. But in Wordsworth the secrets of strength and weakness are so subtly blended together, that the note of depreciation must be entered upon with the greatest caution, for before long it must be changed into one of awe-struck admiration and praise. This simple, creeping style, shorn of all the usual graces of poetry, not seldom gathers to itself a rare dignity and impressiveness, a tenderness and depth of feeling from some invisible stir and excitement in the poet's spirit. We feel the power lurking behind this apparently simple enumeration of details, though possibly we may fail to track it to its secret lair.



. . . a sharp May storm  
 Will come with loads of January snow,  
 And in one night send twenty score of sheep  
 To feed the ravens ; or a shepherd dies  
 By some untoward death among the rocks :  
 The ice breaks up, and sweeps away a bridge :  
 A wood is felled ; and then for our own homes !  
 A child is born or christened, a web spun,  
 The old house-clock is decked with a new face ;  
 And hence, so far from wanting facts or dates  
 To chronicle the time, we all have here  
 A pair of diaries.

*The Brothers*, Ll. 151-163.

Among the other passages of similar power, we may refer to the description of Leonard pining for his mountain-home among the seas, and seeing the images of nature in his beloved valley reflected in the bottom of the water, and of the fraternal love of the elder brother carrying the younger on his back to school on a rainy day (Ll. 44-65, and 251-267). From all this it is clear that when Wordsworth enunciated his famous theory of identity in language between prose and poetry, he had visions of a deeper affinity than are apparent to the ordinary eye, that he had penetrated into a hidden recess of power which works upon the bare language of prose and makes it akin to poetry. His thoughts were not confined merely to that "neutral style" illustrated, as Coleridge suggests, in Chaucer and the eighteenth-century satirists.

These qualities of austere and glorified bareness of style are still more perfectly illustrated in *Michael*, which is, in some respects, the best of the group of rustic poems. Every line of this poem is charged with a simple intensity, an austere depth of feeling that lifts what appears to be the language of bare recital to an immeasurable height and dignity of utterance. It is wonderful to see how the poet narrows down his own mind to the limits and dimensions of a rustic intellect, and makes up in intensity what he sacrifices and foregoes in point of breadth. He



studiously excludes all wider implications of the subject. The mountains seem to shut in his mind as inexorably as they did the body of old Michael ; and yet what an intensity and grandeur of effect waits on this studied circumscription of range ! The manners of the dalesmen, the quiet dignity and sturdy independence of their lives, their somewhat grudging and ungracious, yet ever unfailing, recognition of the claims of kinship, the brooding depth and tenderness of parental love among them which hides itself under a rough and undemonstrative exterior and receives a strange heightening and enhancement from the persistence of local attachments and the narrow round of rustic occupations—all this is brought home to us not so much by detailed description as by the very quietness and restraint of the tone of the poet, which suggests more than it describes. The theory that rustic passions are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature, which, when stated in general terms, seems to be but an airy and fanciful emanation from a poetic mind, is endowed with an almost irresistible quality of appeal and certainty of conviction in being applied to an individual case with such convincing realism of touch. The very prosaic and unimpassioned manner of the poet forbids the idea of a fanciful dalliance, and suggests an almost prophetic certitude of manner.

And grossly that man errs, who should suppose  
That the green valleys, and the streams and rocks  
Were things indifferent to the shepherd's thoughts.

Matthew Arnold has nobly praised the "bare, sheer, penetrating power" of the style of the poem : and Emile Legouis finds in it the purest assimilation and suffusion of the genuine mountain-spirit. Praise such as this cannot be improved upon : we can but develop and elaborate what has been said with such admirable brevity and condensation. It cannot be denied that Wordsworth here



achieves a new effect of style for which past literature affords no precedents. Each sentence taken by itself impresses as rather low-pitched and commonplace ; but a spirit which is not merely a quality of style but seems to emanate from the inmost recesses of the poet's heart broods over the poem as a whole, and lifts the individual sentences to a much higher level than their independent merit would seem to warrant. In the hands of Wordsworth style ceases to be a mere literary grace, and becomes the expression of feeling and character, a spiritual quality of rare power and penetration. An effect like this is to be got nowhere out of the poetry of Wordsworth, and the style impresses us as so perfectly adapted to the matter and the sentiment that we cease to be troubled by any extraneous considerations as to how far it is congruous with the poet's special theory. We do not inquire whether it is rustic speech or not : the poet's narrative is in such admirable harmony with the few speeches directly put into the mouth of Michael, and is so studiously restrained from all high poetic flights, that we are quite ready to credit the old shepherd with the authorship of the poem : there is nothing in it which could not have as well come from his lips. Anyone is quite at liberty to call it prose ; but it is prose of that glorified and transfigured kind which puts poetry to shame, and surpasses the highest effects of the latter.

*Ruth* is another poem in which the poet seeks to illustrate his theory about the tendency of rustic passion to interweave itself with "the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature". But although the respective influences of Nature on Ruth and her faithless lover have been set forth with a fine discrimination, we take the poem but as a theoretical exposition of Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature. In it we do not actually see, as we do in *Michael*, how the passions wind themselves round the beautiful images of Nature, and acquire a tenacity and permanence communicated by the everlasting hills themselves ; we



merely hear the poet expounding this subtle and intricate interaction. In *Michael* the feelings themselves undergo a bath<sup>\*</sup> in mountain-mists, and suffer a strange "hill-change"; in *Ruth* we merely hear how they might have been influenced by Nature. In the one poem we get a vivid and dramatic representation: in the other a mere theoretical exposition; so that from the standpoint of the illustration of the theory, *Michael* has a more honoured and authentic place than *Ruth*, which should rather be included among the poems dealing with the poet's Nature-philosophy.

In point of language, *Ruth* betrays no very marked trace of the poet's special theories; Wordsworth in it seems already on the way to emancipate himself from their narrowing effects. As he steps out of the boundaries of the familiar landscape he seems to shake off the spell which it had cast upon him: with his excursions into exotic scenery he seeks to reassert the normal claims of the imagination. The style clothes itself in purple quite in keeping with the magnificent tropical beauties which it undertakes to describe: all thoughts about the identity between prose and poetry, and the necessity to conform to the actual speech of men, being automatically discarded as the imagination puts forth its native vigour and wings itself for a flight. Such traces of the theory as still persist are rather resolved into a kind of glorified simplicity which sheds such a freshness and halo on Wordsworth's most characteristic poetry. The naked and bald elements in Wordsworth die a natural death as he passes the stage of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and are transformed into a glorious and almost transcendent simplicity which appertains to his poetry so long as his imagination retains its freshness and vitality. They reappear, after the brief flowering time of his genius is over, as a heavy and uninspired tendency to moralizing and reflectiveness in his later poetry. The dominance of prosaic elements is the besetting danger in Wordsworth's poetry, both in its earliest



beginnings and its later phases : but there is a characteristic difference in the quality of this prosaicism between the earlier and the later years. The prose of the early period is that of a writer who holds his poetic powers in reserve, and its weakness is due to the excess of self-restraint and a heroic faith in the commonplace. The prose of the later years is that of one who has lost the magic quality of his inspiration, and tries in vain, by elaborate exposition and recondite philosophizing, to recover the lost secret—a fruitless attempt to bring back the authentic note by striking with tiresome insistence upon the old chords which had somehow or other ceased to thrill with the old music.

We have thus examined the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* dealing with rustic life in the light of the poet's special theories with respect to both subject-matter and language. We have come across examples both of splendid successes as also of lamentable lapses. We have found that for essential passions and elementary feelings in rustic life, Wordsworth has given us some poems at least in which they have been successfully brought out, though the vein is not so rich and so abundantly worked out as might have been expected from the confident generalizations of the Prefaces. So far as a picture of rustic manners is concerned, Wordsworth has embodied them in very few of the *Lyrical Ballads* poems, though *Michael* is undoubtedly the very best and noblest presentation of the tenor of rustic life that has ever been written. A few concrete illustrations from rustic life throwing light on its general tenor, and the openings of deep thought and feeling which it affords, if not to the characters themselves, at any rate to the poet, have been selected, and presented to us with rare felicity and imaginative sympathy in the Sixth and Seventh Books of *The Excursion*. In the matter of language, too, we have followed every shade and pitch from the noble austerity of *Michael* to the blank inanity of *Simon Lee* and *The Thorn*, but in general, Wordsworth



may be said to have succeeded most where the conversational accent is not so very pronounced.

*The Prelude* reconstructs for us the real basis of the grounds on which Wordsworth felt impelled to select themes from rustic life in his poetry. These grounds when analysed turn out to be purely personal ones, and hardly admit of that kind of generalization which Wordsworth seeks to build up on them. The peasants and dalesmen had already stood glorified and transfigured to the childish imagination of the poet because of the sublime background of Nature against which their life is placed. The spiritual value of rustic life was doubly enhanced to him on his emergence from the abyss of despair into which he was plunged on the failure of his revolutionary dreams. At a time when he had lost all faith in human nature, rustic life was revealed to him as a welcome refutation of his morbid and pessimistic fancies, and as a happy confirmation of his faith in the innate nobility and dignity of man even in his lowest grades. With an eye lately purged of the mists of despondency, he discovered a glory and a halo in even the most commonplace incidents of rustic life, and drank in wisdom and inspiration from the humblest sources. But unfortunately, in the rapture of this new recovery, he failed to leave behind a convincing report of the actual *process* of revelation: the authenticity of the vision is brought home to us indirectly, through the genuine fervour and solemn ecstasy of the poet, rather than in any detailed record of individual examples. He has the right prophetic manner, the mood of a man to whom high visions have been vouchsafed; and his accents carry conviction to us, though details are withheld. The following passage from the Thirteenth Book of *The Prelude* will show from what abiding depths of his soul came the light that transfigured for him the face of rustic life:

. . . when I began to inquire,  
To watch and question those I met, and speak  
Without reserve to them, the lonely roads





Were open Schools in which I daily read  
With most delight the passions of mankind,  
*Whether by words, looks, sighs, or tears revealed :*  
There saw into the depth of human souls,  
Souls that appear to have no depth at all  
To careless eyes.

*The Prelude, Book XIII, Ll. 160-168.*

The trouble for the reader is that Wordsworth in most cases does not explain the process through which the lesson is brought home to him. Because for him a few broken words, or even looks, or sighs, or tears were an adequate medium for revelation, he does not knit them into a connected and coherent message for the reader : he does not unfold the world of unexpressed emotion that lay behind a sigh or a tear, but expects the reader to have sufficient imaginative insight to pierce through the veil that he draws over the process. And after all that Wordsworth has said upon the subject, we cannot but feel that the lessons were received more because of a peculiar constitution of the receptive mind than because of any special proficiency of the teachers themselves. It is not open to every mind to imbibe the stern and almost cruel consolation of a Michael, and to extract a mood of hope and joy from the stolid immobility of a Leech-gatherer.



## VII *Nature-poems in the "Lyrical Ballads" : Synthesis between prose and poetry*

BUT these poems on rustic life do not fill the entire contents of the *Lyrical Ballads*. There is a group of poems that are devoted to an enunciation of Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature. It is rather strange that these poems which to us constitute the very best that Wordsworth wrote, his most original and fruitful contributions to the field of poetry, did not draw to themselves any considerable share of attention, nor are they even once referred to in the rather long Prefaces. There is a singular unanimity of silence both on the part of the poet and also of his critics with respect to these wonderful Nature-poems on which Wordsworth's poetic fame to-day principally rests. Nature provided the real core and centre of Wordsworth's mystic faith, and rustic life was glorified merely because of the radiation of light over it from this central source. Wordsworth's comparative indifference to these Nature-poems, coupled with the extravagant stress that he lays on the poems of rustic life, would naturally occasion surprise, unless we recollect that Nature-worship was for the poet merely a reversion to an earlier strain, rooted in the wonderful experiences of his childhood and early youth as recorded in *The Prelude*, whereas the interest in man, though not without something of a rather vague and nebulous antecedent in these younger years, was substantially a later growth, shaped and fostered out of his revolutionary ardour, and woven out of the stuff of his most recent experiences. Hence it is quite natural that Wordsworth should look upon his faith in man as something in the nature of a new revelation, and attach but a secondary importance to the Nature-poems which were the real nucleus of his mystical inspiration, and conferred probability and veracity on all his glorification of rustic life.

In the Preface Wordsworth tends to look upon Nature not so much as the sovereign mistress, but rather as a



handmaid to human life. She teaches "a permanent and philosophical language" to the rustics living in her bosom, and interweaves their passions with her own beautiful forms and images. In short, she modestly allows herself to be overshadowed by the human figures who owe their patent of nobility to her alone, peeping shyly from behind the sturdy and towering figure of old Michael, or tripping wantonly at the heels of the wild, faun-like, gamesome Lucy Gray. Therefore, the few poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* in which her native majesty is figured forth have all the greater interest for us, and specially on the score of their language. Preoccupation with rustic life naturally suggested a style based on a close imitation of rustic speech, and Wordsworth's was but an indifferent hand in the reproduction of the conversational accent, which merely tended to impose a heavy handicap on the successful working out of his theory. With this obsession shaken off in the pure Nature-poems, Wordsworth gave a fair chance to the working of the other part of his theory about the identity between the language of prose and that of poetry.

The Nature-poems included in the First Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* comprise the following : *Lines Written in Early Spring*, *Expostulation and Reply*, *The Tables Turned*, and the wonderful "*Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*" : while the additions made in the Second Edition mostly consist of fragments subsequently incorporated into *The Prelude*—*The Simplan Pass*, *Influence of Natural Objects*, *There was a Boy*, *Nutting*, *Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower*, and *Poems on the Naming of Places*. Our present concern with these poems is mostly on the score of their language, and the fitness with which they tend to illustrate Wordsworth's theory about the identity in point of language between prose and poetry. These Nature-poems, as we have seen, have one advantage over those dealing with rustic life, in that they give expression to a more original and inspiring body of thought, ideas of a greater dignity and more sustained importance, than



the latter. Thus the language in them is redeemed from the lowness and triviality that mark the rustic poems, and attains to a greater point and compactness of expression. And it is wonderful to see, in the case of the rhymed poems, how closely not merely the *choice*, but the *order* of the words as well, approximate to those of prose, and with what apparent ease and effortlessness the claims of rhyme and metre are met, and their difficulties surmounted. And all this has been done without any appreciable lowering of the poetic quality : the ideas of the poet flow naturally into a mould that is common to prose and poetry alike, without ever lapsing into the hardness and rigidity of prosaicism. Perhaps it is the poet's consciousness of the fact that he is enunciating a new philosophy of life that lends to his language all the directness, the natural idiom and sequence of prose : and at the same time, the intense sincerity of his convictions and the depth of his personal feelings serve to charge his simple utterances with the heightened quality that belongs to poetry.

It is unnecessary to give illustrations, where almost every line would serve the purpose. In fact, examples of the inversion of prose order are extremely rare in these poems, and the few cases that can be noticed do not offer any obstruction to the free flow of the idea. The last stanza of the *Lines Written in Early Spring*, or the famous stanza in *To My Sister* :

One moment now may give us more  
Than years of toiling reason ;  
Our minds shall drink at every pore  
The spirit of the season—

goes to show how closely the language of poetry may approach that of prose without losing any of its grace, provided that the thoughts are marked by a certain weightiness and dignity.

In *Expostulation and Reply* and *The Tables Turned* the



actual presence of an argumentative and controversial element lends an added smack and a sharper edge and pointedness to the language. There may be a few touches of awkwardness here and there in the manipulation of the conversational note—a defect which Wordsworth could not entirely shake off : *e.g.*, in Stanza 3, *Expostulation and Reply*.

You look round on your Mother Earth,  
As if she for no purpose bore you,  
As if you were her first-born birth,  
And none had lived before you.

But, on the whole, the conversational accent has been very successfully captured and thrown into the deeper note of the poems, leading at times into a superb blending of homeliness and sublimity, an effectively simple expression of a deeply felt truth, as in the lines—

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can ;

or—

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings ;  
Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things ;  
We murder to dissect—

lines which reveal the depth of the kinship between the language of poetry and that of prose as emphatically as do the *Satires* and *Moral Essays* of Pope on a lower level and with reference to a purely intellectual order of ideas and feelings.

But nowhere is the element of conversational terseness more fully realized than in another poem of the *Lyrical Ballads*, viz. : *A Poet's Epitaph*. Here Wordsworth evinces in a wonderful manner some of the essential traits of a master-satirist—the power of hitting off the weaknesses



of different classes of men who are apt to carry their heads a little too high, and of embodying them in phrases of admirable sharpness and condensation. Not Pope himself shows a greater mastery of the craft and imports a greater sparkle and point into his language than Wordsworth in this famous poem ; and yet the prevailing mood is the very reverse of a satirical one. All this satire, which, by the way, is never fierce or malicious as in Pope, but merely contents itself with administering a much-needed rebuke in the name of humility to persons who have an overweening sense of their social and moral importance, only leads the way to a glorification of the shy and modest poet ; and the sharp and trenchant sayings are suffused and ultimately swallowed up by a touch of caressing tenderness. The importance of the poem, from the standpoint of Wordsworth's theory, consists in its laying down another safeguard under which poetry may legitimately strive to assimilate the directness of prose, and the trenchancy and pointedness of conversation ; though the talk here is that of a cultured poet and does not confine itself within the narrow range of rustic interests.

Wordsworth's real contribution to the theory lies in its demonstration that the language of prose can be quite fitly applied even to the enunciation of deeper truths and the treatment of higher and more tender feelings in poetry than what previous poets had tended to confine it to. He does not touch the real accent of rustic speech, its quaint humour and blending of shrewdness and simplicity, its native penetration rendered more piquant by narrowness of outlook, which we come across in the poems of Burns, or in the novels of Scott and George Eliot. But in the use of prose language for purposes of poetry he definitely crosses the old boundary-lines ; he strikes a new note, the like of which was not heard before. It is not the careless rapture and audacious abandon of the Elizabethan love-lyrists ("Drink to me only with thine eyes"—the poems of Ben Jonson, quoted by Raleigh in his *Wordsworth*, p. 90). Nor is it the austere tragic reticence,



the supreme hush that falls upon language in its rendering of moments of dramatic crisis, which we come across in the great dramatists—though this note is occasionally present in the best of Wordsworth, as for example in the last two stanzas of the *Lucy Poems*, and in a pervasive and unfelt way in *Michael*. Nor again is it the middle style of Addison, with its sober good sense and urbanity of manner, or sharp rapier thrusts, and an epigrammatic presentation of commonplace truths and maxims of morality, as in Pope. Nor, in the last place, is it the neutral style which Coleridge sought to father upon him—a style of which Chaucer is the best exemplar, and the interest of which lies in a racy and humorous delineation of social manners and customs. Wordsworth's employment of the language of prose in his poetry is, in its habitual tenor, something different from all this, and follows a line of its own. He makes it available in respect of a range of deeper and more intense feelings than was the case with any previous poet, and of the enunciation of new truths about nature and man. In such poems as *Lucy Gray* and *The Education of Nature*, the simplicity of prose is transfigured with a rarer touch, quite in keeping with the pervasive mysticism of the poet's thought. And in the poems of a maturer period, such as *To a Highland Girl*, *Stepping Westward*, *The Solitary Reaper*, *She was a Phantom of Delight*, *I wandered lonely as a Cloud*, *The Cuckoo*, etc., the prose element is present as an instrument of simple grace, and delicate suggestion of truthfulness and sincerity which blends itself in a subtly inextricable manner with the nameless magic of poetry, and modifies its vaguer and more etherealized attributes in the interest of a noble simplicity and authenticity of impression.

The result in these cases is the forging of a style which is the aptest embodiment of the peculiar shade of Romanticism that Wordsworth's poetry represents. Thus in his best pieces Wordsworth achieves a blending of the elements of prose and poetry that is singularly happy in its effects, and



probably unsurpassed by any other poet before and since. No doubt the best examples of this fusion are not to be found within the *Lyrical Ballads* and under the overmastering obsession of the theory enunciated in them. But in his later poems (1802—1805), as theoretical dogmatizing tends more and more to fall into the background, the elements of abiding truth present in the theory emerge more to the surface, and colour his poetic practice with finer and more exquisite results. The prose element in the best period of Wordsworth's poetry becomes as it were the symbol and guarantee of steadiness of imagination and a scrupulous fidelity and truthfulness in the record of the inner vision, until in his years of failing inspiration, the fine balance tends once more to be disturbed, and the prose, spurning its former limits, turns against its quondam ally and sets itself to sow tares in the wheat-fields of poetry.

As for the Nature-poems written in blank verse, in them the problem is simplified by a total discarding of the conversational accent as well as of a close imitation of actual rustic speech. They move on a level that is frankly above the reach of the rustic intellect: we can never conceive of a rustic, however richly endowed by Nature, as the author of the *Lines on Tintern Abbey*. They, however, offer another interesting illustration of the real affinity between the language of prose and that of poetry. We have already seen how the language of prose is used with different degrees of effectiveness in the blank verse poems dealing with rustic life—*The Old Cumberland Beggar*, *The Brothers* and *Michael*. Nature-poems in blank verse use, on the whole, a mellower and more quickened sort of prose, though none of them reach the austere bareness and tragic reticence of the style of *Michael*. The thing that is most striking in these latter is the quiet and measured sobriety of tone with which Wordsworth records his deepest feelings and most intimate convictions; it is in this studied moderation that the prose element in his style makes itself felt. And yet



this style, apparently so unimpassioned in its brooding quietness and pensive meditation, rises quite naturally, and effortlessly to the highest mood of mystic rapture without ever quitting its hold on the central core of truth and the authentic note of a genuine personal experience. Never was there a subtler interfusion of prose, with its lucidity and moderation, into the intangible, magic grace of poetry than in the best poems of Wordsworth. His highest mystic visions and raptures are recorded with a sureness and precision of touch, with unblurred outlines, and without the least shade of vagueness and indistinctness. Even in his most excited moods he maintains the calm, unmoved demeanour of one in the witness-box, bound by solemn oath to tell nothing but the barest truth ; and sometimes, indeed, he carries his scruples too far, even to the detriment of the artistic effect, by interposing needlessly timid qualifications in the interest of exactitude of statement.

In his best poems Wordsworth has travelled much further beyond the limits of his theory ; they are written not merely in illustration of his theoretic assertion about the identity between the language of prose and that of poetry, but in obedience to a deeper and truer instinct. Indeed, the prose element in these best poems is not merely a question of language, not a question of a minute and meticulous sifting of the more obvious and commonplace words, to the rejection of everything that is uncommon and extraordinary. It is conceived in a much bolder spirit than in the more timid and cautious pieces of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and is quite compatible with unusual words and inversions of the prose order. It is not merely prose language, but the veritable spirit of Prose incarnate, that presides over these poems—Prose with its native truthfulness and scrupulous sincerity, flowering spontaneously by reason of its purity and intensity of feeling into the full-fledged glories of Poetry. The highest achievement of Wordsworth along this line is that he assimilates, as no other poet has done, the spirit of



prose and makes it bloom into the tenderest and most exquisite sort of poetry. He thus achieves a deeper and truer synthesis between these two rival forms than any other poet in the English language. And it is the achievement of this deeper harmony that should outweigh the crudities and lapses resulting from a more literal and formal imitation in our final judgment on the question of Wordsworth's fidelity to the principles of his Prefaces.





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